



Facing
"Sword
Angel"

傷
かない

機巧少女は
マシンドール

Unbreakable Machine Doll

海冬レイジ

Illustration

粗末な部屋の中央で、
ぶらーん、と謎の物体が揺れている。
ネットだ。魚網のようなものが、
天井からぶら下がっていた。
その中であつたのは、白くて、なめらかな何か。



シャルは目を見張った。
シグムントが翼を広げ、
警戒感をあらわにする。
(何て魔力……！　これが
人間に出せる出力なの……!?)
ロキとケルビムがそろって
飛び退き、距離を取った。



「俺も交せてくれよ。
ダンスの相手がいらないんだ」

Raishin
Akabane
赤羽雷真

「おともします雷真。
雷真が行くところ、お風呂の中までも」

Yaya
夜々

「ふん、余裕ぶっちゃつて。
ム力つく無礼者ね」

「あのままでは、
あの娘——死ぬぞ！」

Sigmund
シグムント

Charlotte Belew
シャルロット・ブリュー

Frey
フレイ

「私だって、
人形使い……」

Rabbi
ラビ

「がう〜」

『I'm ready』

Cherubim
ケルビム

「目を閉じろ。
これで終わりだ」

Rohi
ロキ

Kikou Shoujo wa Kizutsukanai Volume 2

Facing Sword Angel

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contents

Prologue 白い暗殺者p11

Chapter 1 夜会、開幕前夜p21

Chapter 2 秘密の片鱗p52

Chapter 3 くだらない質問p85

Chapter 4 救われた命をp117

Chapter 5 ヴァルプルギスの夕べp149

Chapter 6 愚か者の選択p180

Chapter 7 てのひらで踊る魔剣p213

Epilogue 白い殺人鬼p246



**Unbreakable
Machine-Doll**

Contents

1. Prologue.....	1
2. Chapter 1.....	17
3. Chapter 2.....	62
4. Chapter 3.....	109
5. Chapter 4.....	155
6. Chapter 5.....	202
7. Chapter 6.....	250
8. Chapter 7.....	297
9. Epilogue.....	347
10. Afterword.....	364
11. Translation Credits.....	368

Prologue – The Assassin in White

“Raishin, you’re so amazing. Yaya is... Yaya is already... Aaaahhhn <3”

In a blissful voice, the girl’s body was trembling all over.

That body wasn’t human, but rather, a high class automaton. With the gentle sunlight filtering through the trees overhead, she was in a good mood as she walked.

This was England, and they were in the Royal Academy of Machinart, Walpurgis. The Night Party was commencing tomorrow, and the entire student body had been caught up in the Night Party fever. Unexpectedly, some of that enthusiasm might have rubbed off onto the girl.

That aside, there was a tinge of annoyance in Raishin’s voice as he spoke.

“Cut that weird voice out, Yaya. People will get the wrong idea again. Especially about me.”

“But you were unbeatable in P.E. I could see the envy in everyone’s eyes during class!”

Yaya hadn’t heard a word he’d said. There was an enraptured look in her eyes as she spun around the place.

“Yaya is so happy. It seems like everyone is finally acknowledging Raishin. They’re recognising how strong he is, how cool he looks, and how he’s only gentle towards Yaya.”

“Your fantasies are leaking out into reality, and your delusions aside, I think you’re making quite the mistake here. This is a school for magi, so there’s nothing “cool” about being good at physical activities whatsoever. ... In fact, I might actually be the most barbaric and primitive guy on this campus. I’m so sick of attending makeup lessons day after day.”

He rubbed his stiff brow with his thumbs.

“Even though it’s a Saturday, I have two makeup classes in the afternoon. Let’s just quickly get back to the dormitories so I can pick up my texts. We’ll have lunch in the school cafeteria, then head over to the school building.”

“Ok <3”

Yaya smiled back at him in response. However, once they entered the room, her smile vanished.

In the middle of the plain room, there was a mysterious object swinging about.

It was a net. It looked like something that was used to catch fish, only it was dangling down from the ceiling.

Something was caught inside it. Something white, and smooth.

After realizing someone's skin— thighs to be precise— could also be seen in there, Raishin realized he had been staring at “a forbidden piece of clothing” for a good five seconds.

There was a lone girl clad in a school uniform, with both her legs raised up high, in a dangerously erotic pose suspended inside. Her hair was fastened to the right, and was a beautifully deep pearl colour. A curiously long scarf, a garterbelt, and a fluffy ribbon gave her a look that was best described as cute.

Squashed beneath her butt was an animal that looked like a cross between a wolf and a dog with black fur, also caught in the net. Its shoulders had armour attached to it, giving it an automaton-like appearance.

So... what was this?

An ominous black aura was beginning to form around Yaya, much like a black hole.

“What kind of play is this, Raishin? Bringing a girl into your room... and then suspending her like that...!”

“Don't jump to weird conclusions! I was with you the whole day!”

"I took my eyes off you when you were in the changing room for 0.3 seconds!"

"0.3 seconds is not even enough time for a pick up line! Wait, peeking into a changing room is a serious crime!"

The girl in the net pathetically wriggled her body about, trying to appeal to them to help her.

Seeing such a pitiful sight, Raishin loosened the net, lowering it onto the bed.

As soon as her feet touched the bed, the girl moved to extract herself from the net, but instead found herself entangled even more. Her limbs were stuck, so she flopped about like a fish out of water.

Her sluggish movements surprised Raishin, so he used his knife to cut the net open.

"Uu... Thank you."

Trembling like a mouse, the girl offered her thanks.

She was beautiful. Her red eyes were like rubies. In contrast to her weak face, they had a curiously intense feel to them.

The twin bulges on her chest seemed to defy gravity. Raishin found himself blushing unintentionally.

“What were you doing in my room? Depending on your answer I may have to call security— woah!?”

Perhaps sensing the hostility in his voice, the wolf dog had suddenly leapt at Raishin.

“Woof!”

“Woah, what a huge dog! Are you an automaton? Why are you in my room!?”

“Woof woof!”

“Stop barking. You look like a dog, but it doesn’t means you have to act like one too.”

The girl hugged the dog, nervously pulling it away.

“Rabi can’t speak... but he is... my family.”

“... I take back what I said earlier. Nice to meet you Rabi. I’m Akabane Raishin.”

Meeting the wolf dog's gaze, he extended his right hand out.

The dog looked up at Raishin with round eyes—

Chomp!

“Owwwww!”

“There's blood Raishin! We have to stop the bleeding quickly!”

“Don't lick it Yaya! What are you, a dog?!”

During the resulting commotion, the girl had somehow slipped away.

Her disappearance was unexpected. For someone who was so sluggish earlier, she had surprisingly quick feet when it came to running away.

“... What in the world was that?”

Raishin muttered as he looked around the room.

Scattered to one side were some springs, pulleys, and elastic cords.

“It seems like she was making a trap, but then got caught in it.”

“It can’t be... a honey trap!?”

Yaya’s face turned pale. The next moment, the rumbling of a mysterious tremor could be felt.

“... No, no matter how you look at it there’s no “honey” lying around.”

“That girl was obviously using the “show him your panties” trick to entice Raishin! If you really like panties so much, then please just look at Yaya’s and Yaya’s alone!”

“Don’t pull up your kimono! Have some shame!”

It was turning into quite the troublesome situation. The look in Yaya’s eyes was also very dangerous. It would be great if I never see her again, Raishin thought to himself.

As a matter of fact, he did meet her again, and much sooner than he thought he would.

He had barely stepped foot out of the dormitory, and already the openly vigilant Yaya was glaring at an area shaded by trees.

From inside the shade, a beautiful pearl hair and a dog's tail could be seen.

Raishin sighed and called out to them.

“What do you want?”

The girl timidly stepped out from under the tree and nervously held out a basket.

“What is it?”

“I wanted to apologise for that incident earlier, so... I made a bento.”

The sound of paper crumpling could be heard as Yaya gripped the texts in her hand tightly.

“So, the relationship between the both of you has reached that level already... as I thought...!”

“It's obviously a trap! How can somebody prepare an apology in advance!?”

“Well, I'm... pretty good at cooking, so...”

“Your skill with cooking has nothing to do with this. Unless you’re saying you can surpass time and space?”

The girl opened the basket with trembling fingers. It appeared she wasn’t lying when she said she was a good cook. Delicious looking sandwiches were packed neatly inside.

“No... I appreciate your offer, but we’re already going to eat at the cafeteria.”

The girl began to tear up. Seeing no other way around it, Raishin reached for a sandwich.

Bringing it close to his nose, he sniffed. There doesn’t seem to be any strange odor.

Feeling Yaya’s murderous glare on his back, Raishin took a bite.

“Geh! Bleah! What the hell’s inside!?”

“Uu... It was supposed to be sleeping pills, but since I couldn’t get any, I just put in lots of salt.”

“... Salt?”



“By upsetting the balance between the potassium concentration and sodium concentration in the body, this should cause the cells in the body to be destroyed...”

“Putting someone into an eternal sleep is a cute idea, but don’t you think that by putting salt, someone will notice it before shoving the sandwich down their throat?”

If somebody ate the whole basket though, it would probably kill them.

“Seriously, what goes inside that head of yours... No, forget it. I don’t want to get dragged deeper into this. Let’s go, Yaya.”

Turning his back on her, he started to walk off. Before he took another step though, his senses told him something was wrong.

Right in front of him, there was a patch of earth which was obviously a different colour from the rest.

The girl behind him was staring at him expectantly.

Raishin sighed at the obviousness of it, and took a step diagonally to avoid the discolored ground.

The sound of sadness floated from behind him. The girl was even sniffing. It was extremely unbearable. Raishin deliberately withdrew his foot, and stepped onto the discolored soil.

The earth opened up. A newspaper functioning as the cover of the trap floated downwards, gently coming to a rest at the bottom of a little hole. It was about 30 centimetres deep.

“... And just what exactly is this?”

“A pitfall...”

“Wrong answer. I don’t think you could even catch a kid with this.”

“But if I dug it any deeper, then I wouldn’t be able to get out...”

“... Well, I guess at least a pit this deep might cause a fracture. All in all, it’s a pretty malicious trap.”

The girl’s cheeks flushed crimson even though what Raishin said wasn’t really praise.

“Um, in that case... how about we take a bath together?”

Ripping sounds echoed in the back as Yaya started shredding the texts in her hands.

Raishin’s eyes were half closed.

“... A bath?”

“You fell into the hole... so you must be dirty.”

Excitedly clearing a path through the grove of trees, the girl gestured for Raishin to enter.

Inside that grove, there was a bathtub which looked entirely out of place.

“Why... is that thing here...”

The girl had a little pride in her voice as she answered.

“So you can soak in the forest...”

“No, that joke isn’t funny at all, you know?”

Her openly suspicious behavior only made Raishin more curious. Without noticing it himself, Raishin had drawn closer, until he was close enough to bump into her... Raishin checked himself, and took a step back.

Ignoring the girl who had suddenly moved away, he peeked into the bathtub.

“... And what is this?”

“A bug bath...”

The girl had fallen on her butt, and answered Raishin in a voice that sounded like a mosquito buzzing.

“If anyone falls into a bug bath, even if it’s you, their spirit will be drained by the disgusting insects...”

“Yes, well, I can see earthworms and centipedes wriggling inside, but there’s only five of them in total?”

“After catching five, I felt like my spirit had been drained already...”

She confessed somewhat embarrassingly. It seemed she was aware of her own inability to handle bugs.

“Um, in that case, how about...”

“You still have something up your sleeve?”

“Uu... Now I’m serious. Please come to my room tonight. ... Ok?”

It was an awkward invitation. But it was a real honey trap in action!

Yaya was muttering something incomprehensible in a low voice, while the shredded texts in her hand started to scatter in the wind like confetti.

Any further provocation would be dangerous. Raishin sighed.

“Hey, enough already. Just what are you trying to do? I’ve endured your games long enough. For your information, I don’t have time to play with you all day.”

It was a cool line, but since the reason behind his lack of free time was the fact he had make up classes to attend, the whole thing came off rather uncool.

Staring at Raishin, while her body trembled, the girl firmly declared out loud.

“I am going to... assassinate you.”

Chapter 1 – The Eve of the Night Party

Part 1

“Are you serious?! How could you?! I can’t believe this!”

It was a lively Saturday afternoon. Students were thronging the cafeteria, which was built out of reinforced concrete, with one wall made entirely out of glass. Inside this modern building, a girl’s voice could be heard clearly.

It belonged to the young girl with an elf-like beauty to her, Charlotte Belew.

Sharing the same table as her were Raishin and Yaya. Also, a small dragon—Charl’s partner, Sigmund, was on top of the table munching on some chicken.

“You don’t have to yell at me three times.”

Raishin averted his eyes from her glare. Charl picked up her fork and thrust it in the direction of Raishin,

“You let someone who said ‘I am going to assassinate you’ get away? Are you some kind of despicable coward?!”

“Don’t call me that. What was I supposed to do?”

“I’d have retaliated right there and then.”

“As expected, the great T-rex’s thinking process is on a whole ‘nother level.”

With a wry grin, Raishin stabbed his fork into his fried fish.

“Unfortunately, I am a civilized person. I’m not going to stoop to something that barbaric.”

“You, civilized? Ha! That’s really funny, coming from someone who attacked me, and used violence to try and steal a woman’s most important thing from me.”

“Don’t say it in such a weird way! People who are eating here will get the wrong idea!”

His fears were quickly realized. The low whisperings were accompanied by waves of hostility in his direction. Even without turning around, he could feel the painful gazes of the female students on him.

Yaya bit her lower lip, her voice trembling as she struggled to get the words out of her mouth.

“Raishin... you... you actually... did that...!”

“Don’t believe her, Yaya. In fact, weren’t you with me the whole time during that incident?”

“That’s so cruel Raishin! Even though Yaya has asked you to use her if you ever felt like it!”

Yaya had broken down into tears. Trying to explain things now would be a waste of time. Feeling a headache coming on, Raishin rubbed his temples, and continued,

“Let’s just put that aside for now.”

He decided to completely ignore Yaya. Yaya exclaimed “Put that aside!?” and continued to sob even louder. Raishin used his hand to cover her mouth, and continued speaking.

“Retaliating would have been pointless. It’s not like the other party was a participant in the upcoming battle anyway.”

“You say that, but the truth is you didn’t have the confidence to win against her, right?”

With a teasing grin on her face, Charl took out a notebook, and quickly scanned the pages.

“White hair, with a dog constantly following her around; there could only be one person who fits that description.”

She pointed out an entry inside with her finger.

“Third year, Frey— registration code Silent Roar. She was originally the 100th seat. She went two ranks up, and one rank down, and now she’s in 99th place. Your opponent for the first battle.”

‘What? That girl... is a participant in the Night Party?’

He couldn’t imagine her possessing a gauntlet. Her weak face and withdrawn nature didn’t seem like a fit, but more importantly, he couldn’t imagine her having the grades to qualify.

“What, didn’t you know?”

“The top ranks might be able to remember with one glance, but us lowly mortals have to go through harsh memorization before we can recall such details.”

“Hmph, such composed frankness. You really are an irritatingly rude person.”

An eerie aura was floating over from the silent Yaya. Waving it off with her notebook, Charl turned her chest away and continued on, undaunted.

“It’s as you can see. You’ve already demonstrated your strength, so there’s going to be people who’ll try to make you disappear before the Night Party starts.”

“Why go through all that trouble? As my ‘first opponent’, we’d meet in the first round anyway.”

“Are you an idiot? Do you have a death wish? You’ll never win with that sort of mentality.”

“—”

“I’m pretty shocked. You really lack self-awareness. After all, you did defeat the head of the public morals committee...”

She broke off. A moment later, she strongly continued, like she was using words to put the past behind them.

“You defeated Felix Kingsfort. To the hundred participants in the Night Party, you are a dangerous dark horse. Anyone ranked below 50th place is fearful of you and your abilities.”

At that moment, Sigmund raised his head, having ripped of a piece off chicken skin.

“It’s probably just gossip though.”

He was looking out of the window. Charl, Raishin and Yaya turned to look as well. In front of the cafeteria, The Main Street ran from north to south. And right in the middle of that, someone was setting up a cage that was used for holding bears.

Even though he was sick of it, her pearl colored hair stood out. And of course, since that person was none other than Frey, her loyal partner Rabi could also be seen. Displaying impressive power that belied his size, Rabi was hauling the cage into position.

Once he stopped, Frey lifted the iron bars, and stepped inside.

She took out a questionable magazine whose front cover was adorned with a picture of a half-naked girl.

She placed it in the middle of the cage. It appeared that the magazine was... bait.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He didn't want to believe it.

(Does she really think I'm the sort of guy who'd fall for that!?)

While Raishin stood there, mortified, sure enough— as he'd come to expect from her, the lock securing the iron bars came undone, and with a loud crash slammed shut on her.

Being locked in, Frey stood there in a daze for a few seconds.

After about 10 seconds in, she finally seemed to grasp the reality of the situation she was in. Panicking inside the cage, she frantically ran about, tripping on her long scarf and falling down.

She struggled to get back on her feet. Similar to the net incident, she was hopelessly slow.

Rabi was outside, nervously circling the cage. It appeared he wasn't very bright either.

Suddenly, his ears perked up. Noticing something, Rabi turned around.

A slender, male student had come to a halt in front of the cage.

He had a half-sized mantle draped over his shoulder, and his face had a graceful look to it. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to call him a pretty boy, but his eyes were sharp, and the look on his face would make a lesser man flinch.

And his hair— it was a brilliant shade of pearl.

Behind him was a grotesque looking automaton that looked like several steel sheets had been crunched together to form a humanoid appearance.

If one word was used to describe it, it would be "Painful". Thorn-like protrusions covered its body, which themselves were covered with multiple thin edges. The whole body was metallic, giving it a wholly artificial looking existence. Instead of hands, two large blades were set in place. The blades were roughly the length of Yaya's height. This was probably a blade that relied on its heavy weight to force its way through objects.

Looking at the male student, Charl spoke in a surprised voice.

“It’s «Sword Emperor» Loki.”

“«Sword Emperor»... You mean Sacred Blaze?”

“That’s right. One of the 13 members of the «Rounds», as well as someone who’s been acknowledged as a potential rival to the «Marshal». He’s been undefeated in all his mock battles. Even though he’s only a second year, he’s already one of the 10 most powerful in the school.”

“Wow. But how do I say it... he kind of resembles Frey. Especially their color.”

“Well that’s obvious. They’re siblings.”

“Siblings—?”

Having heard that, when he looked closely their faces did resemble each other somewhat. However, they didn’t look like a pair of siblings who got along well. They look like they were just exchanging words with each other, when—

Suddenly, Loki grabbed hold of Frey’s scarf, pulling her up against the bars.

Reflexively, Raishin stood up. Charl was startled.

“Wait, Raishin! Are you planning on sticking your neck into that?”

“I’m just going to take a look at the situation. Let’s go, Yaya.”

“Wait! Loki isn’t one of those gentlemanly magus types. If you tangle with him with your previous attitude, don’t think you’ll be able to settle things so simply as last time!”

Ignoring her kind warning, Raishin stepped out.

“Fine! I’m not responsible for what happens next!”

Charl crossly returned to eating her pasta. Sigmund though, had already finished his meal, and was licking his plate clean, tail wagging in satisfaction.

Part 2

In front of Frey who was trapped inside the cage, her younger brother, Loki, had suddenly appeared.

“What foolishness are you up to now?”

Frey turned pale, and averted her eyes from him in fear.

Loki’s gaze pierced Frey’s chest. On top of her two bountiful mounds, there was a shiny pearl white glove sticking out of her pocket— the proof of one’s participation in the Night Party.

On the opposite side of the iron bars, Loki’s eyes darkened.

“You’re still holding on to that? I thought I told you to withdraw. There’s no chance of you winning against anyone. You’re not going to survive at all. Withdraw now before you get hurt.”

“... But I...”

“You don’t want to get hurt right? Just obediently listen to me.”

“... But I...”

“Silence!”

Gripping Frey’s scarf, Loki forcefully pulled it towards him. Her forehead hit the iron bars, sparks flying out of her eyes.

“The weak have no say in anything! They only need obey the strong!”

“Woof!”

Sensing his mistress was in danger, Rabi started barking. However, after Loki shot him a glare, he retreated with his tail between his legs. Although he looked impressive, his weak nature closely resembled his mistress.

Loki violently released Frey, tossing her backwards.

“If you wish to complete your mission so badly, I’ll show you just how far you really are from reaching that goal— Cherubim!”

At his command, the automaton began to stir. The parts in its body began to whirl, expanding out like a set of wings. On each were 8 thorns-sharp short swords that had been mounted on.

[Command]

Sounding like it passed through a phone, the automaton spoke with a mechanical voice.

Rising unsteadily to her feet, Frey withdrew to the innermost part of the cage.

“Uu... Let’s do it, Rabi.”

“Woof!”

“I am also... a puppeteer...!”

Focusing her spirit, she released magic from the palm of her hand. Flowing into Rabi, it activated his magic circuits.

Automata developed after the Renaissance weren’t just simple soldiers. “Magic Items” were also installed so that magic arts could be activated.

This was Machinart. Releasing magi from cumbersome rites and magic circles, this was how modern day magic was casted.

Rabi’s fur stood on end, while something like electricity started running over his face. Energy started gathering, and once it was full, Rabi howled, and “something” resembling a ball of silent electric energy was launched out.

It generated some kind of incredible sound pressure that blocked the ears as it traveled on. Smashing rocks in its path, and throwing up large quantities of dust, it pressed forward.

Cherubim didn't move to evade, but swung its blade at that "something".

An unnaturally large gust of wind was accompanied by the loud roar of the resulting gale. Without using any magic at all, Rabi's "something" was dispersed harmlessly by Cherubim.

Frey's eyes widened. The trembling of her red pupils signaled the realization that defeat was inevitable.

The result was obvious at this point, but Loki coldly ordered his automaton, "Go."

[I'm ready.]

Cherubim leapt. An unnatural gust of wind formed, and then flowed towards Cherubim. Riding it, the automaton performed a few light maneuvers in midair, aiming to slash Rabi as it came down.

Rabi nimbly dodged. However, his opponent's movements were faster. A second attack. Then a third. Under the persistent onslaught from Cherubim, Rabi found himself cornered.

The blade was extremely heavy. With a large roar, the iron sword came crashing down, aiming straight for Rabi's neck—

“—?”

From Frey's position, all she could see was darkness.

It was a gentle black darkness that stretched wide. That was the girl's hair, and the sleeves of her kimono.

The beautiful young girl had inserted herself between Rabi and Cherubim. One of her slim arms was bearing the weight of the heavy blade, while the other had gently pushed Rabi out of the way.

“You're... Raishin Akabane's...!”

Frey stared wide-eyed in shock. If this automaton girl was here, that meant only one thing.

“Seriously, what a bloodthirsty lot you are. Can't you wait till the Night Party starts tomorrow?”

It was a voice laced with an exaggerated sigh.

As she thought, Raishin Akabane was standing there, with a look of feigned ignorance upon his face.

Part 3

“Very pleased to make your acquaintance in a place like this, “Sword Emperor”. Or should I address you as your majesty?”

Although his tone was light, Raishin’s guard was up as he carefully studied his opponent.

Now that he was looking at them side by side, he could see Loki and Frey had some similarities. Obviously their hair color was the same, so were the color of their pupils and skin. Their graceful faces were also similar.

However, their constitutions were vastly different. Disregarding the difference of their chests, Frey was more delicate and fragile. Loki on the other hand was like a coiled spring, full of vigor. He looked like he would be strong in a fist fight as well.

This guy would be hard to deal with... while thinking that, he turned his attention to Loki’s automaton.

The strength required to swing those enormous blades wasn’t something he could take lightly. On top of that, for Rabi’s attack to be ineffective meant that it was highly likely that it was equipped with a mysterious magic circuit. He also noted the numerous short blades in its body.

The puppeteer was trouble, and his automaton equally so. This wasn’t going to be a straight forward contest. Feeling a slight chill, he turned to confront the Sword Emperor, Loki.

The look in Loki's eyes transfixed Raishin. In that moment, Raishin shivered slightly.

(This guy... He's a monster inside...!)

His body was enveloped in an extraordinary magical energy. They weren't lying when they said he could stand up to the Marshal!

In a cold voice that would freeze hell, Loki spoke.

"Who are you?"

"I am a puppeteer from Japan, Akabane Raishin."

"I'm sorry that you've come out of your way to meet me like this, but now is not a good time. Get lost."

"I refuse."

"I'll kill you."

"That too, I refuse."

“... If I may say so, I am a tolerant person. However, there are three things in this world I cannot forgive. People who give me orders. People who defy me. And also, Orientals who don’t know their place.”

“What a coincidence. I also hate arrogant westerners.”

Staring at each other, sparks invisible to the eye was flashing between them. It was a powder keg waiting to go off. Not wanting to get involved, any curious onlookers who had gathered quickly stepped back.

After a moment, Loki sighed.

“What an idiot. You have my deepest condolences. You’re obviously unable to see the difference in our strengths, right?”

“You’re the idiot. The person who goes around calling others idiots is usually the biggest idiot of them all.”

“Stop joking around. My grade averages are AAA+”

“Thinking that grades are the only way to measure one’s intelligence is proof that one’s an idiot. Also, judging people by their allotment in life is the pinnacle of idiocy.”

“Is that what you tell yourself to protect what little pride you have? Your foolishness borders on the tragic. I bet you’re the sort that repeats classes, right? And you probably have to attend makeup lessons and remedial classes as well, right?”

“Idiot. I just transferred in so obviously I’d have to repeat some classes just to catch up. As for the makeup lessons... well, so what if I have to go.”

“As I thought. You really are an idiot.”

“No, you are.”

“You.” “You.” “No, you.” “It’s you.”

Close enough that their foreheads were practically touching, this pointless argument went on.

“Um... Raishin?” “Loki...”

Yaya and Frey timidly raised their voices. However, the two youths were engrossed in their childish spat, and didn’t notice them.

“Unpleasant Oriental. I guess the only language you understand is brute force!”

Before he had even finished his sentence, Loki's automaton had begun to attack. Right as Raishin ordered Yaya to block the strike.

A torrent of dazzling light cut in between them.

The light sliced through the cage holding Frey, blasting the bars away.

"That's enough. And also, what were the two of you thinking, acting like brats?"

The girl with the pretty features had a stunned look on her face as she interrupted them. Behind her was a dragon roughly 8 meters long. Its steel scales shone with a velvety gloss, while its wings hung majestically in the air.

Its impressive presence made Frey tremble, and fall on her butt inside the cage.

Loki's sharp eyes grew even sharper as he glared at the pretty girl.

"Do you intend to get in my way as well, Charlotte Belew?"

"It's Charlotte. I don't really care if you two want to destroy each other, but you should at least be aware of your surroundings as part of TPO. If you both let loose here, you'll cause problems for everybody."

(Like you're one to talk, walking disaster—) was what everyone surrounding the commotion thought, but of course, no one dared to say out loud.

"If you plan on taking things any further, you'll have to deal with me."

"So, you plan on helping him?"

"N-no! I am not helping anyone. I could care less what happens to this pervert over here, but by the rules of Noblesse oblige requires me to keep public order, and to return the favor I owe him I have to fight him fairly in battle in accordance with the code of the samurai."

"Favor...?"

His thin eyebrows narrowed together. The look in Loki's eye as he stared at Raishin changed, like there was a glimmer of light in it. It resembled the way a predator viewed its prey.

"I see. So, that idiot is the one who defeated Felix... Second Last, huh?"

"What about it?"

Gathering their magical energy, the two of them glared at each other.

As the bystanders held their breath while they watched on, Loki turned his gaze away.

He turned around like he had lost all interest. His automaton also ceased its preparations, lowering its blade. The parts which formed the “wings” retracted back into its body.

Moving to depart, he stopped, and glanced at Raishin over his shoulder.

“Withdraw from the Night Party. And don’t ever get involved with me or my sister again.”

Raishin snorted with laughter as he replied “I refuse.”

His metallic automaton alongside him, Loki walked away.

Raishin suddenly noticed that he had cold sweat running down his back.

With Charl butting in, it was a 3 on 1 fight. It should have been a severe disadvantage for him. However, Loki didn’t call his automaton back because “it was disadvantageous”. He had the confidence that even in that sort of fight, he’d still win. That was why he was able to casually turn his back on all of them.

Once Loki’s figure had disappeared from sight, a ball of light enveloped Sigmund as he transformed back into his smaller form.

Uncharacteristically, Yaya breathed a sigh of relief.

As the crowd started to disperse, Raishin stepped into the cage and extended his hand out to Frey. Frey was startled, but nodded slightly when Raishin asked her “Can you stand?”

“I guess you have nothing to say to me? Such rudeness!”

Rabi approached the petulant Charl, sniffing at her feet and wagging his tail. Charl smiled at him without thinking, then quickly frowned again, covering it with a cough.

Once Frey had stood up, she turned to Raishin and bowed.

“Uh... Thank you... for protecting Rabi.”

“I just did what I felt like doing. More importantly, why do you and Sword Emperor boy not get along?”

If there was an answer, she wasn't forthcoming with it.

Having being rescued, an explanation was expected... normally. But as she opened her mouth to speak Frey closed it again, eyes darting all about the place, eventually looking down in an attempt to conceal it, before speaking.

“Loki... hates me.”

“Hate? What do you mean?”

Frey wasn't saying anything more than that. Bowing to Raishin once more, she turned and hurried off. Rabi chased after her lonely figure.

Her behavior was most curious. Raishin uncharacteristically ignored Yaya—whose eyes opened wide in shock at this— and turned towards Charl, who was standing beside the sulking Yaya.

“She's a 3rd year, so she should have already chosen her specialization. Which department does she belong to?”

“I am not your encyclopedia, you insolent fellow.”

In a bad mood, Charl testily rebuked him, before gazing upwards to think.

“Let's see, Frey should be in... the Machine Tactics department. It should be at the faculty of history.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“... You're not thinking of going to investigate, are you?”

“Let’s go, Yaya.”

“Wa— Are you serious!? I’d advise you not to do that.”

“But it looks like there’s something going on with her—“

“That’s why I’m telling you to stop.”

With a cool look in her eyes, she stated flatly.

“Once you know your opponent’s circumstances, you won’t be able to win.”

He understood what Charl was trying to say.

Chasing after such knowledge would burden him. And once on the battlefield, any hesitation would be fatal.

However—

“If I defeat her without knowing, I’ll probably regret it even more.”

“You think your victory is assured? You’re too overconfident!”

“I don’t intend on losing. That’s why I want to investigate this. After all, that’s what I did the last time, and don’t you think it’s a good thing that I didn’t end up stealing your entry after all?”

Upon hearing that, Charl blushed furiously.

“Fine then, do as you please! I’m definitely not going to help you!”

Part 4

“This is it.”

In the direction that Charl’s finger was pointing, there was an old-fashioned building that brought to mind an ancient tortoise.

The building was constructed out of stone, and most of the edges had been worn smooth by time. Countless fallen pieces of sculptures lying about gave the place an aged feel.

“What’s with that vacant look? You’re really such a dullard. Let’s hurry up and go.”

Didn’t you say you weren’t going to help?

... Those words had reached as far as his throat, but then he remembered, the tongue is the root of all evil. Keeping his remark to himself, and trying his best not to look behind him as much as possible, he chased after Charl. And following behind him, emitting a ghostly black aura, was Yaya.

As they entered the building, cries of panic could be heard.

As expected from a famous person. The lobby was filled with peaceful and quiet students, but once they caught sight of Charl’s face, all calm was lost. There were even people who twisted their backs and slid off benches in panic.

The rest of the people were struck speechless. The gazes fell upon Raishin, the hero from the “Cannibal Candy” incident. Naturally, the sea of students parted, seeing as they were dangerous people.

Awkward as it was, Charl and the other two began asking around. They went to the laboratory that Frey was supposed to be in, and catching some of the students inside, they started to investigate her situation.

“I-I’ve never talked to her. She’s anti-social, and never smiles...”

“S-she’s always staying behind to study till very late.”

“R-r-relationship with her? S-s-sorry, I don’t know anything!”

“Her chest is really big~”

And so forth. In the end, none of them had any helpful information at all.

Charl was glaring at Raishin with half closed eyes.

“What the hell? Did you think I wanted to hear something so useless?”

“Don’t say that to me. Say that to people when we’re asking them questions.”

As rumored, Frey was bad at making friends. Or rather, she avoided people. Out of the information they had collected, what stood out was that she was a shy girl who studied zealously on her own. Even with that attitude, because of her dazzling appearance, she naturally stood out, making her a pitiful character.

(In a way, she does resemble someone...)

Raishin's gaze fell upon Charl, and she started acting suspiciously.

"Wh- what are you staring at? Pervert."

"I think it'd be faster if we went and asked her homeroom professor. Let's go try that instead."

"... Hey."

It was a timid voice. Charl was strangely fidgeting nervously, and she wasn't looking Raishin in the eye.

Yaya was probably jumping to weird conclusions, because the light in her eyes was fading fast.

Honestly speaking, he was getting a really bad feeling about what was to come. Raishin braced himself.

“... What now?”

“You... do you really... like them big after all?”

“Like what big?”

“Are you stupid? Has your brain tissue rotted away? Read the context. Really, if I’d known you were such an idiot I wouldn’t have asked in the first place!”

“Ok, ok. I would appreciate it if you’d be so kind as to explain it to my stupid self, my lady.”

“Mm... Obviously we’re talking about the chest!”

Charl’s face was red all the way to the tips of her ears.

Yaya’s pupils were now void of light, as black as a bottomless lake.

Why had she suddenly brought this up?

Could it be that she wanted to hear a guy’s opinion on the matter?

In any case, there's was no doubt that Charl had an inferiority complex when it came to that area. Raishin stole a quick peek at Charl's chest, before deciding to go with a safe answer.

"I think if I really liked someone, then the chest size wouldn't matter to me at all."

"I-is that so?"

"That's a lie. Raishin really likes big and bouncy breasts, much like Frey's."

Yaya chimed in, and the smile on Charl's face vanished instantly. The edges of her eyes turned up, and countless veins starting popping on her forehead.

"Unfaithful cheater! Indecent man! Those who judge a woman's value by the size of her chest are the lowest forms of existence! So much for 'I want to know about her situation'! You were just lured by her chest, you pervert!"

There was a loud smack, and Raishin's cheek turned red.

Charl marched off in a huff. Sigmund, who was resting atop her beret, turned around. Raishin couldn't understand the expression on the dragon's face, but somehow, it looked like he was giving Raishin a sympathetic look.

Rubbing his swollen cheek, Raishin turned towards Yaya.

“Yaya...”

“Yes?”

“I feel like my chest is dyed with this deep blackness. I wonder, what is this extremely dark feeling I’m having in my heart right now?”

“But...! That vixen was making weird eyes at you...!”

“Like hell she was! She was just discussing her troubles with me!”

“Idiot. Raishin is an idiot!”

The two of them were making a fuss in the hallway of the history faculty.

Suddenly, from above their heads, the solemn peals of a bell floated down.

“Raishin... That’s the bell signalling the start of classes.”

Raishin turned pale, and then dashed out of the history faculty.

Part 5

“Magic is a combination of both consciousness and intelligence. Therefore, an unconscious puppeteer will be unable to release magical energy. Although, in the case of Bandolls, since they have human parts in them, it is not impossible for them to generate magic energy themselves—”

The light voice droning on was accompanied by the sounds of chalk on the blackboard.

After lunch, drowsiness was assailing Raishin. Just as he stifled a yawn, the lecturer turned around and threw the chalk at him.

The tears made his vision blurry, so Raishin’s reflexes were slowed. The chalk hit him spectacularly right in the forehead.

“Raishin! Are you ok?!”

Throwing her pencil aside, Yaya rubbed his forehead.

“As usual, you sure have some guts, Second Last. Not only did you not bring your texts, you had the cheek to turn up late, and now you’re not paying attention in my class.”

The owner of the voice was an intelligent-looking and beautiful woman standing behind the lectern, dressed in white. Her head hair was swept upwards, and she was wearing a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. It was Raishin's homeroom professor, the head of the machine physics department Kimberly.

Her cold stare could be felt from behind the lenses.

"All the participants in the Night Party have excellent grades... all but you, the only person to earn entry via winning a battle. Consequently, your academic ability is severely behind the rest of them. For the sake of such a pitiful boy, someone has crammed all the important parts of the 1st year syllabus, and in fact, you should be kissing the feet of the genius who condensed the syllabus— who is this someone you should be thanking?"

"I owe everything to Professor Kimberly."

"The Night Party starts tomorrow. Are you sure you have the time to be playing around? I don't wish to nag you, but you could at least be a little more serious about this."

Kimberly was strict, but the tone in her voice was light. That she would be teaching a tedious subject like this was strange. It was very shocking.

Unable to keep silent anymore, Raishin opened his mouth.

"Even if you say that, the Night Party is conducted via the use of Machinart. Practically, isn't an idiot like me, as well as those honor students from the Rounds under the same starting conditions?"

The glasses on Kimberly's face slid down. They revealed a shocked look on her face.

"Is it possible... you actually have no idea? Wasn't it taught to you in guidance class?"

"It may or may not have been, but because of a combination of anxiety and lack of sleep— I lost to the sleep demon."

"Oh boy... I think this was mentioned earlier, but the academy functions on complete meritocracy. If not, there's no way a young and vivacious woman like me could be able to become a professor."

"Vivacious is such an obsolete word, it shows just how old you actually are."

The chalk flew at him once again. Raishin hurriedly raised his hand to block it.

"The Night Party is also a meritocratic world. The smarter ones get better treatment, and the slower ones will get the short end of the stick. The 100th seat, or in other words, the lowest entrant is quite frankly, the harshest placement of all. For example, the order of battle.

"Order? I thought the Night Party was a battle royal?"

"No. It's a royal rumble."

He had heard the phrase before. In the past, when magicians fought in battle, in order to increase the excitement for the spectators, this unique style of fighting was invented.

“On the first night, the 100th seat— in other words, you, and the 99th seat will do battle.”

He would be abruptly thrust into battle. So then, his opponent would be Frey?

“If one party manages to steal the other party’s glove, the fight ends there. Whatever happens, the 98th seat will join the battle the next day. Then the 97th seat. Every night, a new opponent will enter the battlefield. There won’t be any time to rest.”

“So, it’ll be constantly a 1 on 1 fight?”

“That’s not necessarily so. There’s a time limit to every battle. Look at that clock tower over there. You have until it hits midnight to fight. If there’s no conclusion to the battle by then,”

“—The battle will be considered to have reached the next day.”

Kimberly nodded. So that was the essence of the Night Party. As a struggle for survival, the state of the battlefield would be chaotic. It was even possible that the lower ranks might band together to take out a higher rank...

Raishin thought for a moment,

“Then, is it possible to just evade everyone till the last night, and fight the Marshal without wasting any effort?”

“I’ve said it before, the Night Party is a meritocratic world. The first fight between the 100th and the 99th seat— their situation might look the same at first glance, but they’re not on equal terms.”

It was an enigmatic answer. What did she mean?

“It is possible for the 99th seat to sabotage you.”

“But, I won’t have that right.”

“Yes. You’ll have to be on the field for at least an hour. ... well, there are exceptions to this too, but you don’t have to worry about it for now.”

“I think I’ve got it. So when the next day comes, the 98th seat has the right to avoid battling—”

“The 99th seat only has the right to sabotage you. The higher rank you are, the more priority you’re given over the rest. There are no limits to what you can do to sabotage others, after all.”

“Question. Is it possible for the 99th seat to avoid fighting me till the very last moment?”

“That scenario isn’t ideal. The Night Party doesn’t just last for a single night. If you’re fighting with someone from a higher rank, and a lower rank suddenly cuts in, what do you think will happen?”

“It’d be 2 on 1... Depending on the situation, it could become disastrous.”

“In theory, the lower ranks will try to eliminate each other on the night they appear. By doing so, they can preserve the 1 on 1 condition.”

If that was true, then certainly, Raishin’s existence was a potential stumbling block to Frey. Fighting with someone from an upper seat, if Raishin was darting about the place, she wouldn’t be able to focus fully on the fight, and there was nothing more dangerous than that.

In that case, like Charl said, Frey was scheming to assassinate Raishin because she wanted him out of the way?

Frey was timid and weak, not vicious and cunning. He couldn’t imagine her killing people because she had the aim of becoming the Wiseman. Or perhaps, she had a reason for wanting to go that far...?

Lost in a sea of thought, the sound of the bell ringing broke his concentration.

“That’s the bell for the end of class. Oh boy, all that worthless chatter has eaten up so much of our time. Study the rest on your own, and compile a summarized report for me. At least 30 pages.”

Slamming the texts on the table, Kimberly turned and left quickly. He could only stare at the retreating figure bitterly.

“30 pages... Is she serious?”

Raishin turned pale as he stared at the borrowed texts. He had to read all these written in English? And then summaries it in 30 pages?

“... Speaking of which, because of all the time wasted on idle chatter today, we didn’t finish covering the texts, didn’t we? Even if I tried my best it’d still be quite useless right?”

“Cheer up Raishin. Yaya will help with the reports.”

“Yeah... I’ll be relying on you then, Yaya. A lot.”

Feeling a lot like crying, he reached out for the texts. On the other hand, now that Raishin was relying on her, Yaya closed her notebook happily.

Departing from the school building, they walked on a small path back to the dormitories. Because of the heat of the sunset, they walked under the shade of the trees, their figures blending in with the darkness.

While walking, Raishin muttered like he was talking out loud to himself.

“... Brother and sister, huh.”

“Yes. I’m sure that Irori will be an excellent sister-in-law to Raishin, and vice versa. <3”

“I could care less about your perverted fantasies. I’m not thinking about that, I’m thinking about the two from this afternoon.”

Hearing the words “I could care less” made Yaya depressed. However, she quickly recovered.

“Are you talking about Frey and Loki?”

“Yeah.”

“They don’t resemble each other at all. Their presence is totally different from each other.”

“No. They resemble each other alright.”

Strength and weakness. At first glance, Loki and Frey possessed two contradicting expressions, but the two were strangely similar. There was no life in their eyes, and they both never smiled.

“If they’re siblings, why can’t they get along with each other?”

“...”

Realizing her slip of the tongue, Yaya quickly sank into low spirits. Her voice was choked like she was crying.

“Sorry... Yaya shouldn’t have...”

“Idi-ot. What are you feeling down about?”

Resting his hand on her head, he smiled at her as he always did.

“Even siblings will have things that happen to them. Or perhaps, things will happen because they’re siblings.”

“Raishin...”

“And also, once you lose one, you understand some things too.”

With that, Raishin sank into silence, deep in thought.

Yaya trotted lightly in front, and turning to face Raishin, looked up at the person she had feelings for.

“Raishin... are you interested in that?”

“Yeah.”

“Open your eyes! Those are just lumps of fat!”

“Not her chest! She said she was going to assassinate me, remember? I’m interested in why she said so.”

“Lies! Look into Yaya’s eyes and say that.”

“I’ll say it as many times as you wish. I have no interest in those balloons... on her chest at all.”

“You looked away! You did! You did!”

“No you idiot, that was because, uh, the sunlight was on— I mean in my eyes.”

“You’re fumbling with your words~!”

Having his neck wrung was unbearable. Raishin hurriedly ran for the safety of his room.

Part 6

Raishin was in his room, undergoing strict “interrogation” from Yaya.

At the same time as that was happening, something else was going on. Inside the academy, there was a waiting room built into its solid gate. Inside, a solitary nobleman was relaxing on a sofa.

He had a long and slender body. His knowledgeable countenance gave him the look of a researcher.

The nobleman lifted his cup of red tea, and looking out of the window, gazed at the sunset.

“... This place hasn’t changed a bit.”

Looking like a sword thrust into the ground, he stared at the silhouette of the clock tower.

“It’s the same as last time— rotting away.”

At that moment, a knock on the door could be heard.

A lone girl being escorted by a security personnel stepped into the room.

It was a female student with pearl hair. Behind her, a wolf dog automaton followed.

“Uu... you called... for me, father...?”

It was a voice barely louder than a whisper. She didn't look at the nobleman as she spoke, but kept her eyes firmly on her own feet.

The nobleman gave a warm smile, stood up, and beckoned the girl to come closer.

“Don't be so stiff, Frey. I just came to see the current situation.”

“Situation...?”

“Finally, the Night Party is going to start tomorrow, right?”

Frey drew her body back in surprise. The nobleman placed a hand on her shoulder and said,

“I have high hopes for you.”

“Me...? Not Loki...?”

“He is special. Comparing yourself to him would only lower your self-confidence, and it would be a foolish thing to do. I understand your abilities better than anyone else. I also know how hard you’ve been working.”

Frey looked up at the nobleman uneasily. Her face was troubled, hesitant on whether to believe those words.

“Your living expenses seem fine. If you think it isn’t enough though, you can always tell me. ... Ah yes, I have a present for you.”

Reaching into the breast pocket of his suit, he pulled out a photo.

In the photo, there were 10 dogs. They were all different breeds, a hound and a terrier being 2 of the types inside, but they all wore the same armor.

On seeing the photo, at first, the tension on Frey’s face vanished.

However, her expression soon clouded over.

“Uu... Then, father.... About the promise...?”

“Of course I remember it. Don’t worry, all you have to do is complete your mission. If the tests prove successful, you’ll be able to live with everyone again.”

“... Yes, father. Thank you for the photograph.”

The lost look in the girl’s red pupils was all but gone now.

Chapter 2 – A Glimpse of the Secret

Part 1

The adults were always talking about his brother.

“Goodness, Tenzen’s ability is remarkable.”

“It’s like he’s a fierce god, a veritable prodigy.”

“A weapon like that is only seen once every hundred years.”

“Surely the name of Akabane will spread across the land”

And as always, that conversation turned in the same direction.

“On the other hand, Raishin...”

“He’s already 12, but still shows no interest in puppetry at all”

“I heard his talent is mediocre at best, but he doesn’t have the desire so nothing will come out of him.”

The gazes in the boy’s direction were cold. They were full of disappointment, contempt, and even a bit of pity.

Those adults must have found him repellent somewhere in their hearts.

Feelings of worthlessness. Shallow pride. Aspiring to be like the absolutely talented elder brother. And also, jealousy. Those emotions surging within the boy, he ran from the practice hall.

The father was strict, but was a man who knew the importance of waiting. He would patiently wait at the practice hall for the son who was completely unmotivated.

However, there were limits to his patience.

Frequently visiting the dojo in town, occasionally staying over, not returning home- for three years this continued, until one day, when the rabbit ear irises were in bloom, his store of patience finally ran out.

“Show me what the strength of the martial arts you’ve been learning all these years.”

Summoned to the practice hall, the father summoned 3 puppets, and the boy was kicked, beaten, and thrown about the hall. The painful ordeal went on for an hour. By the time it was over the boy couldn’t move his hands or legs.

The martial arts that he had used to strengthen his body was useless before his father’s puppetry.

He thought if he could thoroughly beat that into him, then the son's feelings towards puppetry would change. However, the son was not the sort who would just quietly go along with it.

His lower body sore, he heatedly yelled at his father.

"Father. I'll say this clearly. I will never become a puppeteer in this life!"

Unmoved by his declaration, the father silently looked down at the boy.

His gaze was as harsh as Mount Fuji in winter. With eye power that could control numerous puppets, he stared down fiercely at the boy, and said in a dead serious tone,

"This is a house of puppeteers. Those who do not engage in puppetry do not belong in this place."

"... Thank you for your guidance."

His ultimatum was met with an equally provocative declaration. With his hands and knees on the floor, the boy bowed towards his father and departed from the practice hall. He returned to his room and began packing his belongings. Wrapping some spare clothing and his futon into a bundle- suddenly he noticed that his mother was standing in the doorway, with a troubled look on her face.

"Are you serious about leaving? Where are you going to go?"

“Don’t worry. The instructor already told me “Come to the dojo!”, so I’ll be fine.”

“So stubborn. Like father, like son.”

She let slip a small laugh. Smiling like a mother indulging a spoilt child, she said nothing further, but helped him to pack.

And then, bringing him out to the main entrance, she suddenly mentioned,

“Your father told me to tell you this: “Don’t catch a cold out there.””

For an instant, he felt something warm, and his tears unconsciously leaked out.

Even if he had been antipathic to the place all these years, and it held nothing but dreary memories, he had lived here for 12 years. Throwing away his family and leaving was a very painful thing to do.

However, sniffing and crying now would be galling, and didn’t suit him. Hurriedly waving goodbye to his mother, he feigned a carefree attitude as he left his house without turning back.

As he stepped out of the gate, just as he was taking his first steps, someone was anxiously chasing after him.

“Brother! Wait!”

It looked like she had ran out in the middle of lessons. Out of breath as she caught up to him, the person clad in black was none other than his younger sister.

Her eyes were a deep black, and unlike her elder brothers, they were round, and had a gentle look to them. His sister’s eyes were now moist, and her voice had a pleading tone to it.

“Brother... Are you really leaving the household?”

“I’m more of the sort who eats swords and jujitsu holds for breakfast. It agrees with my stomach more, you see.”

He was bad with gloomy moods, so he tried to put on a frivolous attitude.

“A dog cannot hope to fly in the sky. However, you are different. Unlike me, you possess the ability to soar high in the heavens.”

“That’s not true! I’m sure even you-“

“Become a fine puppeteer. One that can even surpass our elder brother Tenzen.”

Whatever his younger sister was going to say, she stopped.

She knew how unshakable his decisions were, and how stubborn he was.

Her eyes trembled and her shoulders shook like she was trying to endure something.

And then, unable to hold on any longer, she clung to her brother's back.

That sensation seemed so realistic, Raishin awoke with a start.

Part 2

The moment something touched his back, his body moved like clockwork.

He was still half asleep, but his body moved on reflex to pin the intruder.

Locking in an arm lock, he pushed the intruder down against his bed. In this position, no matter how strong the opponent was, he wouldn't be able to move easily. If worse came to worse, he could easily dislocate the shoulder.

The arm was slim. The skin he was touching didn't feel like a man's. He could smell a light and nice scent from the hair. The darkness made it impossible to see the figure, but it looked like it was a girl.

"Dammit, Yaya! How many times must I tell you not to sneak into my bed!"

"Raishin!? A night attack?! Is it the vixen!?"

At Raishin's voice, Yaya came flying over. ... From the opposite bed.

"... Huh?"

So then, who was the girl in Raishin's death grip, tapping in pain?



“Wait just a moment Raishin! I’m getting a light now!”

“Wait, Yaya. Don’t bring the light here-“

Before he could finish, the lamp had been lit.

The red light from the fire in the lamp cast a shadow on two things.

In tears from the pain of the submission hold, there was a maiden with pearl hair.

Pacing back and forth nervously, there was a wolf dog in black fur.

Yaya dropped the lamp in her hands. A small ember caught the edge of the bed, singeing it slightly, but no one said a word.

Breaking the heavy silence, Yaya spoke first.

“What is the meaning of this, Raishin...? You won’t let Yaya into your bed... but you let other women share it with you... and even press them down on it...!”

“Waitwaitwait! How can you even jump to that sort of conclusion?!”

Yaya's black hair was wriggling about. Her eyes were wide open. The light coming from the lamp on the floor illuminated her pretty face, making her look like a vengeful apparition. It was a terrifying sight.

"Calm down! This is just another assassination attempt. Try to remember. Even you would try to sneak into my bed to kill me the first few times—huh?"

Something hard was pressing up against his knee. Spotting "something" on her waist, Raishin was violently relieved. Snatching that away, he held it up for Yaya to see.

"Look Yaya! This girl was carrying a knife on her. It was an assassination attempt after all! That's why she sneaked in here!"

"Uu... That knife..."

Half in tears, but with a strong voice Frey managed to say something—something unnecessary.

"If you rejected my confession... I was going to slit my throat with it..."

"Don't lie! Even as a joke, that's going too far!"

Large drops of tears were falling as Yaya began to sniffle.

“Wa... wait a minute, ok? This is a trap worthy of Zhuge Liang... ok?”

A moment later, an ear-splitting wail of anguish echoed throughout the tortoise shaped dormitories deep in the middle of the night.

“Shut the hell up Raishin! Just what time do you think it is?!”

Barely a few minutes had passed before a man in a night-cap came flying in.

His consciousness fading, Raishin was extremely glad for the boarding master’s prompt arrival.

Part 3

“-so please tell Shouko that.”

The next morning. At the first floor of the tortoise dormitory, in the lobby.

Half a day was left to the start of the Night Party, and the school was in high spirits. Right in the middle of that, with a sullen look on his face, Raishin was on the phone. His face and arms were covered in fresh bruises. He was hurting from the welts on his body.

“I’d like an investigation into Frey’s background. I would really like to have done it myself, but I have my hands full dealing with her attacks.”

On the other side of the receiver, Irori gasped.

“Then, the enemy has been bombarding you with various magic arts?”

“No, the attacks weren’t magical in nature. Still, I almost died last night.”

“She did that to Raishin without using magic arts!? Is the opponent really that powerful?!”

“No, well, not exactly, but I guess you could say that.”

“Out of us sisters, Yaya is the most suited for bodyguard and escort missions. For Yaya’s Kongouriki¹ to be ineffective, the opponent must be a fearsome warrior indeed. I understand. I will tell the master straightaway.”

“Ah, hey, wait. I think you’ve gotten the wrong idea- ah.”

The call had been cut. Irori had hung up in a hurry. She probably misunderstood something... but it was fine. It wasn’t as if he was lying when he had said he felt that he was in danger.

Lifting the receiver from his cheek caused a smarting pain on it. The person who caused this wound was undoubtedly still in the room with her breakfast uneaten, weeping uncontrollably. She was seriously depressed.

(Still... that was strange.)

Placing the receiver back onto its rest, Raishin thought to himself.

He didn’t mean to brag, but Raishin’s five senses were sharper than most. It was comparable to a soldier who had served several tours of duty. Even when he was sleeping, the slightest sound would awaken him.

¹ : 金剛力: Herculean Strength

Raishin's room was pretty old. Unfastening the rusty lock, opening the creaky door, and stealthily sneaking up to his bed without him waking up wasn't something an ordinary person was capable of.

Moreover, Frey was such a slow person. He couldn't imagine her pulling off such a risky stunt.

If she was able of doing such a thing-

(... A magic art?)

A magic art that could kill off one's presence. Magic arts that could increase stealth had been in development since the time of the Renaissance. Of course, it hadn't been limited to just that. Like the time with Loki, Rabi had fired off that "something" that had gouged out the pavement.

"Early in the morning and you already have such a sullen face."

I don't want to hear that from you, thought Raishin as he turned around.

Standing in the entrance to the lobby, with a grumpy look on her face, was Charl.

The sunlight was shining down on her gorgeous golden hair, causing it to glow. Looking like she was about to head off for Sunday service, she was dressed in her school uniform as usual. Sigmund was resting on top of her beret.

Hands on her hips, she haughtily turned her chest away from him.

"I remembered a famous tale about Frey, so I came down to tell it to you. Thank me, and reverently listen to what I have to say."

"Hear her out, Raishin. She went asking around the female dormitories a few times."

"Q-q-quiet Sigmund! Or I'll feed you weeds from now on!"

"Sorry for making you go to all that trouble. Please, tell me."

Charl's cheeks were slightly red, and covering her outburst with a slight cough, she continued.

"Do you know of D-Works?"

"... D?"

"I'm surprised. How can you be a puppeteer in the Academy and not know that?"

She sighed. It seemed like somehow, she was getting surprised on a daily basis.

“For the past 10 years, it’s an up-and-coming Machine workshop that has been making a name for itself. They also dabbled in developing magic circuits, and about 5 years ago they patented the Sonic magic circuit. They’re one of the companies nominated for the contract of supplying the British Army with next generation technology.”

“Seems like a prosperous workshop. So, what about them?”

“They’re Frey’s sponsors. Well, Frey and Loki’s.”

Sponsors. In other words, they were the ones paying for their enormous tuition fees.

“- speaking of which, could it be that those automata that they’re carrying around-”

“-are probably the newest models developed by D-Works. Possibly even the prototypes.”

“Prototypes? They mean to test out their prototypes in the Night Party itself?”

In a battle they could ill afford to lose, they were going to use unreliable prototypes?

“Come now. There’s no way they’d risk their automata on such a ridiculous gamble.”

“It’s the reverse. The Night Party is an extremely harsh struggle for survival. It’s a zero sum game where there can only be one winner. Even if you do it the normal way, it isn’t easy becoming the Wiseman. Although it might be a slight gamble, having new technology should be advantageous. Furthermore,”

Charl glanced upwards at Sigmund,

“The Night Party is like a world fair for Machinart. It’s a place where the old, the new, and the superior Machines gather. The magic circuits that become popular here will surely spread throughout the world.”

“... I see. It’s the perfect testing ground.”

They would be able to test it without having to go to war. Recovery of the body was guaranteed, and as long as they could gather data, losing the Wiseman position would be of no great loss.

And even better, if they were to sell their product to the army-

There was no grander stage on which to demonstrate it.

“If that’s the case, then obviously, I’d be the proverbial spanner in the works...”

Defeat in the first round would mean that any tests would not be able to be conducted. It would be the worst demonstration possible.

If Raishin were out of the equation, then the odds of meeting a strong opponent early would be lowered. Using feedback from the battle result, adjustments could be made, and research on tailoring it to better suit the army could progress, strengthening its position.

However- was it really because of this reason that Frey would scheme to “assassinate” him?

Charl was frowning silently, and turned away with a difficult expression on her face.

“What? What’s wrong now?”

“Nothing, really. Just that... well, I’ve heard some unpleasant rumours.”

“Rumours? About D-Works?”

“I’ve heard they bribe important people and twist arms to get special permissions, and perform illegal research. And their lobbyist is a supposed lady-killer who moves from women to women...”

Charl came to herself with a start,

“That was something I saw in “Bingo”, some 3rd rate gossip rag. Such stupid things they write.”

“Incidentally, that’s Charl’s favourite.”

“Q-q-quiet Sigmund! I am Charlotte of the noble Belew family! There’s no way I would ever read such trashy magazines like that!”

The daughter of a noble family shouldn’t be reading gossip magazines, thought Raishin, but he didn’t say it out loud.

“In any case, you understand now, right? The “circumstances” behind Frey’s actions, ultimately is the for the sake of D-Works. Testing their new model, and aiming for the position of the Wiseman, they want to eliminate you so that they can win the Night Party.”

“It looks that way.”

“There’s no need to hold back. Tonight, completely annihilate her.”

“... Now that you mention it, tonight’s the night. My big debut.”

Between his reports and avoiding the attacks, he had completely forgotten about it. The Night Party which he had waited for so long, was finally commencing tonight.

Charl blinked, and the look on her face was troubled.

“Shouldn’t you be a little more nervous? You’re really such a thick-headed person. ... Are you sure you’re going to be fine like that?”

“Don’t worry. Whatever happens, happens.”

“Don’t be so conceited. No one would worry about such a pervert like you.”

Turning the other way, she made a U-turn for the lobby entrance. Chasing after her, Raishin walked her as far as the front yard of the dormitory.

“Thanks. That was very helpful.”

Turning her back around, Charl muttered in a low voice.

“The charm.”

“Hm?”

Don’t forget the defensive amulet I gave you. And the handkerchief too.”

Having said that, she quickly strode off. Sigmund waved goodbye to Raishin with his tail.

“What is she, my mother?”

Raishin chuckled wryly. Reaching into his shirt, he pulled out a silver pendant.

Runes were etched into the pendant, and under the rays of the sun, they shone with a mysterious light. Other than just being a token of Charl's feelings, it looked like it had some power too.

Suddenly, the pendant was filled with a bluish white light... or so he felt.

Passing through the chain, he could feel a vibration in his fingertips. His forehead tingled with pain, and an unpleasant premonition spread throughout his body.

More through instinct than reason, Raishin perceived some sort of danger coming.

And then, reality didn't betray the premonition.

Ripping apart the ground, scattering the soil everywhere, "something" like a cannon blast came flying over.

Part 4

On the balcony of the central auditorium, several elegant tables had been placed.

The students had come to use it for resting. Normally, it was crowded with students, but since it was a Sunday afternoon, there were only a few people around.

At one of the tables, sitting at a seat that allowed her a view of the tortoise dormitory, was a woman.

She was wearing a peculiar kimono which had an open neckline, emphasizing her ample cleavage. In spite of wearing very little make up, she still had an appealing sensuality to her. Packing tobacco into a pipe, she looked very much like a scene out of a portrait. The movements of her hands were graceful, with no wasted effort, which was beautiful.

It was the woman called Shouko.

A doll-maker boasted by Japan, the unparalleled artisan of the Karyuusai name.

Her appearance, as well as eye-patch which did little to hide her pretty face, made her stick out like a sore thumb... or it should have, but the students passing by didn't even turn an eye to her. They didn't even seem to notice her presence. Unbelievably, it seems they were unable to see her at all.

Shouko inhaled, spat out the smoke, and emptied the ashes. Looking satisfied, she cast an easy eye downwards without refilling her pipe.

The academy was full of life. The plaza which was to become the stage of the Night Party was already completed, and the ceremonial curtains and tent which housed the judges were in place. The students were restless, like they were getting ready for a festival.

Sliding her gaze sideways, she looked at the old exterior of the tortoise dormitory. In front of it, there were trees lined up in a way that resembled a tunnel leading to the building. Unmaintained, in the middle of its dense foliage, there was a white color amongst the green that stood out. Shouko's eyes rested on that spot.

The white belonged to the hair color of a girl.

With pearl colored hair, a strange female student was standing in the middle of the trees.

With both hands raised into the air, she was gathering her magical energy. Like she was practicing basic magic arts, she was deep in concentration. She looked like she was practicing by herself where no one could see her.

Briefly, Shouko stared at the girl.

Noticing something, she reached for her eye-patch.

Turning the dial, the shutter opened and closed as three different lenses fitted in it in succession. Choosing the red lens, Shouko observed the girl.

She seemed to have seen something. Shouko was lost in thought for a moment, before letting out a sigh.

“... So that’s how it is. Poor child.”

She looked at the girl with pity in her eyes.

At that moment, a tall lady was walking by near her.

She had red hair swept upwards, and was wearing a white coat over her teaching attire.

It was Raishin’s homeroom professor Kimberly. Her blue eyes turned to the direction of Shouko.

For an instant, her line of sight crossed over to something which shouldn’t have been seen.

Without stopping, she walked on as if nothing had happened.

Having walked a few steps away,

“Heh.”

She had a tiny grin on her face.

Shouko grinned for a moment as well, before returning her gaze towards the tunnel of trees.

In that instant, before Shouko’s eyes, a large amount of magical energy had swelled up.

Part 5

Raishin was unable to comprehend the nature of the thing flying towards him.

The air was distorting and undulating. If he had to put it into words, it was like a blade with no tangible form. The invisible blade had multiple layers piled up on top of each other, and whirling about, it gouged out the pavement while heading straight at him!

That invisible “something” was cutting up soil and gravel, about a meter in diameter. If he got caught in it, he would wind up as mincemeat.

Raishin was already moving his body. He had hopped away like a grasshopper.

Springing his whole body, he jumped a bit further to compensate for some margin of error in his perception, but the magic arts field of effect was bigger than it looked.

Lighting grazing his left arm, the sleeve of his uniform was ripped apart.

It was a dull feeling. There wasn't any pain. Even so, unable to use his left arm, he fell down onto his right side. Flipping himself up, he assumed a guarded stance.

He knew whose handiwork this was. He had recently seen this magic art up close.

Was she finally casting aside her slow façade and revealing her true colors? If so, then he was in trouble. He wasn't sure if he could hold out before Yaya came...

"No! Rabi, stop!"

The attacker's killing intent towards Raishin was... probably non-existent.

Frey was holding on tightly to Rabi, trying to hold him back with all her strength.

Magical energy was leaking out from every corner of her body. However, it didn't look like she was doing it volitionally. In a panicked state, Frey was tightly clinging on to his neck.

Something was obviously wrong with Rabi.

The first thing was that his eyes were different. Normally round and cute, they had the ferocity of a wild animal now. His fangs were bared, and saliva was dripping from his jaws. He was staring at Raishin like a wild beast that had caught the scent of blood.

Was he in some sort of trouble? Was the machine part of him malfunctioning?

“Hey, move!”

He forcibly pulled Frey, who was still looking back over her shoulder, out of the way. Rabi jumped at Raishin aiming for his throat, but Raishin had fallen on his back and caught Rabi in an overhead throw, planting his foot into the dog’s abdomen for added effect.

Crouching low, he reached for the harness on his waist. Pulling out a cylindrical container, with one hand he pulled out the safety pin. The moment Rabi recovered, and turned his nose in Raishin’s direction, he threw the object.

There was a loud bang. An explosive force, as well as a bright light that obscured any field of vision was released.

Eyes spinning, Frey tumbled down onto the floor. Rabi took two, three steps back before he too, fell down.

Waving the smoke away, Raishin slowly stood up.

He lifted Frey up, lightly slapping her cheeks.

“Hey, snap out of it. Are you ok?”

“Uu... Uu?”

Her vision slowly swam back into focus. As soon as it settled, Frey sprang to her feet.

“Rabi! Rabi!”

“Don’t worry. That was just a stun grenade, it wasn’t lethal.”

Frey lifted Rabi up. After a short while, Rabi lifted his head up, a blank look on his face. Tilting his head slightly, he started sniffing with his nose.

It was the same useless dog as ever- or rather, it was Rabi.

Frey clung to Rabi’s neck, hugging him tightly.

After that, as though she had remembered something, she turned towards Raishin and politely bowed her head.

“Sorrkew very much...!”

It looked like she had combined both sorry and thank you very much.

“I don’t really get what just happened, but it looks like things turned out just fine.”

“Yes, thank you... Uu?”

“What’s wrong?”

“... You’re hurt.”

She was staring at Raishin’s left arm.

The wound on his left arm was much deeper than he thought. There was a deep cut where the skin had split. Even though it had just grazed him, the wound was pretty bad. If it had hit straight on, it might have cut through the bone totally.

Frey rummaged behind her waist, and opened up a pouch. She took out an antiseptic and a bandage, and with experienced hands performed first aid on his wound.

“Sorry for the trouble. By the way, do you always carry that around with you?”

“It’s because I... often... get injured.”

“That’s because you’re pretty clumsy.”

“Clumsy...”

In shock, she repeated “Clumsy...” a few times.

“So. Something must have happened. What was it?”

Frey quickly fell silent, hanging her head.

“You weren’t deliberately targeting me, were you? Why did the magic art activate?”

“Uu... I’m sorry.”

Tears were slowly forming at the edge of her eyes.

“Don’t cry. I’m not mad at you or anything.”

“You are...”

“Am not.”

“You are...”

“I said I wasn’t. I’m just curious. The thing looked strange to me.”

Frey had sunk into a determined silence. Raishin sighed.

“Look, I’m going to say it frankly. I might be a villain, but I’m no demon. I don’t plan on withdrawing, neither do I plan on losing. But when it comes to a listening ear, you could at least try telling me before dismissing that idea.”

Frey looked lost. Her gaze wavered back and forth, looking up at Raishin-

And decided not to. She probably was getting cold feet.

“Things have already reached this point, don’t just stop now. Spill it. Why are you trying so hard to assassinate me? What are you hiding? And also, does this have anything to do with the Sword Emperor-“

“Let’s erase her, Raishin.”

Suddenly, a different voice cut in.

Because he had been so focused on Frey’s expression, Raishin had failed to notice her arrival.

Her shadow grew as Yaya appeared closer.

Like something that had been unzipped, Yaya’s words flowed on endlessly.

“Resorting to using Machinart, this person is an assassin in both name and deed. Please give Yaya the order to defeat her. Yaya will make sure that there’ll be nothing left of her.”

“... Like I would say such a thing.”

“Be more decisive! At this rate you’ll really be in danger! Raishin will-“

“Don’t worry about me.”

“-be led astray by those two lumps of fat...!”

“Ah. Your true intentions have leaked out.”

“In any case, all vixens should be massacred by-ah!”

By the time Yaya had noticed it, Frey was already increasing the distance between them.

Hugging onto Rabi’s back, her scarf fluttered behind her as they ran away. Whether Frey was unexpectedly skilful, or Rabi was the one who was skillful, she didn’t fall off his back as they disappeared from sight.

There was an awkward silence.

A moment later, Yaya was sobbing convulsively.

Large tears were falling from her face as she cried. Her magical energy going haywire, her teardrops were instantly crystalized, forming orbs of water with the density of steel.

“Hey, stop crying like that. Are you hurt somewhere?”

“Raishin is so cruel... casting Yaya aside so that the both of you could have a lover’s rendezvous...”

“Are you willfully ignoring the wound on my arm? And speaking of which, this is the first time I’ve heard of any secret rendezvous.”

The sobbing continued. Yaya was considerably upset. What with all that had happened in the past few days, and the incident last night, she was more unstable than she had ever been before.

Attempting to fight the first battle in this state would be troubling. Even though there was nothing wrong with him, Raishin tried to improve the mood of his partner.

“Come on, stop being such a sourpuss. A third-rate puppeteer like me can only rely on someone like you.”

The crying was replaced by silence more ominous than ever before.



“... Then, how are you going to help my mood improve?”

Instantly, Yaya’s eyes were sparkling. This is bad- thought Raishin, but it was already too late.

Yaya was clasping her hands together, her eyes closed, and face thrust out.

... This position. It couldn’t be.

She wanted a kiss?

Cold sweat ran down his back. They were in a bad spot. People had already started to gather around them. Undoubtedly, they had heard the racket earlier, and came to see what was up. Additionally, this was right in front of the dormitory, so he was aware that there were countless faces staring out of the windows.

“Raishin... Hurry... <3”

She urged him on in a sweet voice. How the hell can I possibly do that in front of other people, he instinctively thought. But if he ignored her now, there’d be hell to pay later. It was a dreadful prospect.

Sweat flowed from his pores. He was paralyzed like a deer caught in an oncoming truck’s headlights.

Abruptly, he felt someone's presence.

Someone was approaching without making a sound. And quickly too. It wasn't the speed of a normal human. By the time he had finished thinking, the thing was already right behind him.

Something hit his back with a thud.

If it was an assassin's dagger, Raishin would have certainly be dead, but, "Raishin! It's been a while~!"

Something was hugging his back tightly, something soft and light, and that something was a girl's body.

Looking at the innocently smiling girl, both Raishin and Yaya exclaimed at the same time.

"Komurasaki!"

Part 6

Asking her whether she wanted anything to drink, Komurasaki replied “Milk!”

They were inside Raishin’s room. Grinning happily, Komurasaki was looking around it.

Her face resembled Yaya’s. She was breathtakingly beautiful- although the way she was built gave her more of a cute feel rather than beautiful. With a carefree expression on her face and red hair tied up in pigtails, compared to Yaya she looked more of a kid. Kicking her legs about, with a happy expression on her face as she waited for her milk, she looked like a cute kitten.

His chest strangely hurt. Perhaps it was from that thing earlier, but his childhood memories were also weighing heavily on him.

Taking the milk that was served for breakfast in the cafeteria that morning, he warmed it up and gave it to her.

“You’ve grown bigger, haven’t you?”

“Tee hee, was it that obvious? Wanna touch them?”

“Don’t strip! I’m not talking about your chest; I’m talking about your height!”

“The cell division finally settled down, and just like my design planned, to maintain the balance I grew taller!”

‘Wow. I don’t really get it, but I guess you’ll soon be comparable to Yaya.”

“If Raishin fondles them, I’m sure they’ll be bigger than sis’s <3”

“Stop talking about your chest! Height! We’re talking about your height!”

“If you’re talking about my height, then because I’ve already entered my stable period, I won’t be able to grow any further.”

“Stable period?”

“Adult stuff. Ahh, now even I can become Raishin’s bride <3”

“Ahaha, Komurasaki is so playful, ahaha. Your big sis has something to say to you. Come sit by her side, Ko-mu-ra-sa-ki-!”

Yaya was hammering a spot on the tatami mat covering the raised seating area.

“Stop that, Yaya. After I went to all that trouble getting that installed, you’re going to destroy it.”

“That’s right~ If you continue to be so violent, Raishin will hate you!”

Like she had just gotten hit by an attack, Yaya stiffened in shock.

“No way... Raishin... would hate... Yaya...?!”

Another bothersome situation was developing again. Raishin felt a headache coming on, but first he decided to ignore her, and turned towards Komurasaki.

“So, what did Shouko say?”

“You wanted to know more about a person called Frey, right?”

“Yeah- wait, I only made that call this morning. Is the investigation already finished?”

“Raishin, you’re going to be busy with the Night Party tonight, right? Because of that, we moved quickly.”

She said it like it was no big deal. However, there was no way anyone could be that fast. For reasons yet unknown to Raishin, it looked like the army had already conducted an investigation on Frey.

Komurasaki wasn’t here because of Raishin’s request.

Most likely, she was here for another reason.

Before Raishin had issued an SOS, was Shouko already checking up on Frey's background?

"For you to come down all the way here, it means that you're going to put that power of yours to some use. In other words- There's somewhere I have to go to, right?"

"Wow, Raishin, you're good~"

Komurasaki grinned at him with an air of innocence.

"The military doesn't have a complete picture just yet. But, if we go there, you'll be able to find out about Frey, and the army will discover what it wants to know."

The army was making use of Raishin to sneak into D-Works and search around. Perhaps it even had something to do with British army secrets.

In the front of Raishin's mind, the image of Rabi earlier surfaced. A ferocious face with his fangs bared. And that rampage he was on. There was something going on with that canine automaton.

"The point being, this is an order from the military, right? I got it. Let's go."

“Please wait, Raishin. There’s barely half a day left before the Night Party starts!”

Yaya worriedly interjected. Raishin laughed,

“I am the military’s dog. My original purpose in coming here was espionage. That was the kind of deal I agreed upon right?”

“But... No. I understand.”

She nodded, the anxiety in her voice gone. Yaya had a firm look in her eyes as she said, “I will follow you, Raishin. No matter where you go, even if it’s into the bath.”

“Don’t come in when I’m bathing.”

“Ah, sis, you can’t come~”

Holding on to the mug in her hands, Komurasaki spoke.

“This time~ the only people allowed to go are me and Raishin, just the two of us.”

“No... no way!”

“Ok then, let’s go~!”

Putting down the mug, Komurasaki clung to Raishin’s arm. It was like a little sister fawning on an elder brother, and of course, Yaya wasn’t going to let the whole thing slide by silently.

“Wa-wa, wait Raishin! Yaya is also going!”

“You can’t. Think about it. If the school learns that you’d been outside of campus, the British government would confiscate you. We might never meet again. That’s something I wouldn’t want.”

“Raishin... you actually think about Yaya in that way... <3”

“Also, Shouko’s orders.”

Something snapped.

“Shouko again, Shouko, Shouko....! If Shouko told you to die, would you die as well!?”

“Idiot, why are you acting like... What’s wrong?”

“Don’t make me worry about you~”

Yaya was half crying and half angry. Raishin placed his hand on her head, and she fell silent.

Like he used to do with his little sister, Raishin ruffled her hair while gently speaking.

“I’ll be back soon, so be a good girl and wait patiently. Ok?”

“Y-yes... <3”

The expression on her face was a complete 180 from just now. With slightly coloured cheeks, Yaya nodded in a good mood.

“Let’s go, Komurasaki.”

“O-K~ Then, I’m borrowing Raishin for a bit. I’ll be sure to get my fill of him completely!”

Her line was clearly designed to provoke a response, and Yaya’s pupils began to open wide.

“Do you have enough magical energy to completely conceal the both of us?”

“Don’t worry, I’m pretty strong. Not only will this hide us from sight, it will also seal off any sound we make and even seal off any smell we give off.”

“So, it fools the eyes, ears, and nose. That’s ridiculously secure.”

“To a normal human, we’d be completely hidden. Even if we were to do naughty things right now, sis would never be able to find out <3”

Yaya was opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish. Tears were fast appearing in her eyes, and her shoulders were trembling. After all the things he had done to improve her mood, it was now gone to waste.

“Wait... Yaya. You understand she’s joking right? It’s just an example, ok?”

“Uu...”

It was time to leave. Gathering his magical energy, he allowed it to flow through Komurasaki’s back.

The magic circuit, Yaegasumi ¹, activated. Although he didn’t understand how it worked, as long as he left it to Komurasaki, the magic art would activate with no problems. This was one of the good parts about Machinart.

Subsequently, from Yaya’s view, Raishin had vanished.

¹
: Eightfold Mist

“Now then, let’s go~!”

Komurasaki’s voice also went unheard by Yaya. Of course, the effect continued even after they left the room. Passing by several students, not even a single one noticed the both of them. Not even the slightest hint of sight, sound, nor smell were present.

Careful not to bump into any of the students, they walked down the hallway, and exited out of the dormitory.

While walking, Komurasaki let out a giggle.

“Raishin, you really are such a nice person~”

“What are you saying all of a sudden... I’m not nice at all. In fact I’m a pretty heartless fellow. I’m just a bastard using Yaya for the sake of revenge.”

“Hee hee.”

Komurasaki continued to laugh for some reason. The profile on her face somehow seemed to have a happy expression on it.

“So, where are we headed to?”

“Let’s see... The orphanage!”

“Orphanage?”

And then, Komurasaki said clearly.

“It’s Frey’s “home”!”

Chapter 3 – A Stupid Question

Part 1

Although he knew that he wouldn't be seen, Raishin was still tensed up as they exited through the gates of the academy.

Normally, he would be able to just walk out by himself, but now there was Komurasaki next to him. The iron barrels sticking out of the eye-holes in the gate weren't spitting out fire, but it made him uncharacteristically nervous.

It was like being held at gunpoint, and all he could do was to maintain the unbearable silence.

After exiting the gate, they walked on for a bit, before stopping in front of an automobile.

"It's the military's car~ C'mon, get in!"

His hand being pulled along by Komurasaki, he entered the car. The car's driver seemed to have been briefed beforehand; once he felt the car shake as "someone" got in, he started the engine.

Cutting through the town, they moved on towards a more rural area. Breaking off from the main road, they turned into a farm road which was muddy from a combination of rain and lack of sun.

To avoid raising any suspicion, the car stopped before the orphanage came into sight.

With Komurasaki leading the way, they proceeded on foot.

The buildings in front of them looked like it belonged to a rich farmer.

Two-storied, and made out of stone; there were two of them and both were superbly constructed. In the middle of the grounds there was a tall silo erected as well as a smaller wooden shed that looked like it was used to house animals.

“That’s... a cattle barn, right?”

“Yup. But huh, I totally can’t smell any cows at all~”

Her small nose twitching, Komurasaki sniffed about. She was right though, the foul odor of cattle manure was absent.

“No matter how you look at it, it doesn’t feel like an orphanage at all. Are you sure this is the place?”

“It’s definitely here~. I was supposed to walk in a 43.189 direction, and 22.546 kilometers from Shouko’s place.”

Komurasaki wasn't mistaken. There was a signboard above the entrance to the premises, and "Orphanage" was clearly written on it. Judging from their appearance, the people in charge appeared to be from the nearby monastery.

Slipping by the signboard, they entered the nearest building which was the small shed.

It appeared to be previously used as a resting place for the farmhands. A man who appeared to be some sort of sentry was standing there, but of course he didn't notice them at all. Yawning, he stared at the farm road.

The musket leaning next to him caught Raishin's eye.

(This place is ridiculously secured.)

The security was nothing to sniff at. The sentry didn't have to be armed, but he was.

They headed towards the center of the grounds, where the suspicious building was.

The construction of the building was even more impressive up close. It was massive and solid. There was no doubt that the people who had this built were loaded.

Strangely though, the windows were all secured with iron bars.

“Ah, look, Raishin! Doggies!”

Pulling his jacket, Komurasaki turned towards the direction of the cattle barn.

The enormous entrance was open, allowing the interior to be seen. There was a steel cage inside, but instead of cattle, they contained dogs.

Sorely tempted by them, Komurasaki looked like she wanted to go inside. Her free-spiritedness was like a butterfly that had just been released. Seeing no other way around it, Raishin turned to the direction of the cattle barn.

A Great Dane, Golden Retriever, Shepherd, Doberman, and a Collie. In addition to these, there were several other mongrels inside the cage. They all seemed to be breeds that were exclusively used as police dogs or in the army. Armor covered their legs and shoulders.

If he had to guess, he'd say they were automata.

The breeds were different, but there was no doubt they were the same type of automata as Rabi.

Raishin entered the barn with Komurasaki following behind him, but the dogs were fast asleep and didn't notice them at all. It looked like they weren't operating at full capacity, although it was possible that they were in their normal state. But Komurasaki's hidden form was deceiving their senses.

“They're so cute~ I wanna raise one too~”

Komurasaki had stuck her arm through the steel cage in an attempt to touch them, but her arms were too short and she couldn't reach the dogs.

Even with her little white arm flailing awkwardly, the dog type automata didn't wake at all. Their twitching ears made them look entirely like real dogs.

Suddenly Raishin halted, feeling a strong sense of unease.

(This is odd. These dogs, even for automata- aren't they're a bit too lifelike?)

The way these were constructed made them the polar opposite of Loki's automaton, Cherubim. If anything, they were closer to Yaya. Automata that strongly resembled the real thing.

(Was there really a need to make them this close to resembling actual canines?)

If they were meant for military use, they would be fine even if they looked slightly mechanical.

Scratching his head, he went deeper inside.

In the middle, there was a room made out of stone.

This was the only strange construct within the barn. It had a thick steel door, and a seal that looked to be the work of a magic art was placed upon it. The peep windows were bolted with iron bars. Its appearance brought to mind a certain something.

— A prison.

“Raishin, what’s wrong~? Are you interested in what’s inside?”

“Let’s open it.”

“Eh! But if you open the door, the doggies will all wake up!”

“I don’t see any type of barrier on it that will trigger an alarm. If we open and close it quietly, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

Retrieving some tools from his pouch, Raishin began to pick the lock. Any 3rd party would have been unable to detect the noise that he was making. The dogs themselves displayed no reaction to the sound of Raishin picking the lock.

With a final click, the door was unlocked.

It slowly opened.

“...It’s empty?”

There wasn’t anyone inside.

Komurasaki and Raishin stepped inside the room and as he turned to close the door behind him, “What business do you have here, brats?”

Unexpectedly, a voice could be heard.

Part 2

An elegant three-storied building was standing at the edge of the forest.

It looked like the estate of a noble. With a refined exterior and superb craftsmanship, this was the Griffon dormitory for the female students. Only the best and brightest were allowed to take up residence in these halls.

On the 3rd floor, resting on a ledge of a window, Sigmund was closing his eyes.

He was basking in the Sun. Although it was close to summer, there was still a refreshing breeze blowing, so the air was chilly. Despite that, Sigmund stretched his wings out in content.

“Sigmund-”

Suddenly, someone called out to him from below.

Looking down, he saw a black haired girl looking up.

Clad in an elegant kimono, it was an oriental automaton. The details on the external appearance were exquisite, making her look the spitting image of a human.

Sigmund flew down towards her.

“What’s wrong, Yaya? It’s rare for you to be alone by yourself.”

“Where’s Charlotte...?”

“She’s sleeping. She couldn’t get much sleep last night.”

The reason was the Night Party. Even though it wasn’t her turn to enter the battle yet, Charl was still nervous about it. The reason was obviously because she was worried about Raishin- but he didn’t say that to Yaya.

It didn’t seem to have crossed Yaya’s mind and instead she was hanging her head with a dejected look on her face.

“Hm. You look down. Did something happen?”

Yaya silently gripped the hem of her kimono.

“Why don’t we sit down first?”

He pointed over to a bench in the yard. Following his advice, Yaya sat down on it.



Flapping his wings, Sigmund flew over and landed next to her.

“What’s wrong? You came to talk about something right?”

Yaya didn’t reply. He decided to change the topic.

“Where’s Raishin?”

This time, there was a response. After hesitating for a while, Yaya spoke.

“Something came up... so he went out for a bit.”

“I see. So he went to investigate more about Frey?”

Yaya flinched visibly.

“I thought so. And you obviously have a problem with that, but you don’t know what to do with those feelings.”

“But that’s because...! The Night Party is tonight. Raishin crossed the ocean just for this occasion. And then at such an important time, no matter what kind of order comes, he shouldn’t have to... Also, Raishin is too nice to that vixen. Even though she’s tried to kill him...!”

The dissatisfaction in her tone gradually lost force, and her words trailed off.

Yaya wasn't angry. It was a mixture of jealousy and anxiety, and it was clearly eating away at her.

The look on her face now was exactly the same as it would be on a human girl.

The tone in her voice suddenly changed as she half sighed a question out, "Sigmund, have you ever thought: I want to be human?"

"Hm. That's a stupid question— but dismissing it like that would be too simple. From the way you phrased the question, you've obviously thought about becoming human, right?"

"Human girls are... unfair. If Yaya... If Yaya was human too... then..."

She hung her head. Tears were forming around the edges of her eyes.

"If you were a human girl, you wouldn't be able to protect Raishin."

"I"

"You wouldn't be able to become his shield, and you certainly wouldn't be able to become his sword either."

Biting her lip, Yaya looked at Sigmund with a pained expression.

“You are a splendid automaton. In fact, you’re probably a one off model in terms of construction. I don’t know Raishin’s goals— it certainly isn’t an ordinary one, since he’s aiming for the Wiseman’s seat. Since he has chosen you to be by his side, doesn’t it mean you’re vital for the Night Party?”

“ ... ”

“Your role isn’t something any girl can perform. And right now, the thing Raishin needs the most isn’t a normal girl that’s a dime a dozen, but rather, an existence like yours.”

Sigmund asked to confirm it,

“Knowing all that, do you still wish to be human?”

“Yaya...”

Her brow furrowed, as she continued, “...is fine as an automata.”

She lightly smiled. It was a smile filled with sadness, a little clarity and also a little pain.

“Even if Raishin won’t look at Yaya anymore, Yaya will still aid him. Even if Raishin becomes infatuated with a human girl, and totally stops caring about Yaya. Even if he does things like holding hands with a vixen, or kissing her, or have a secret affair...”

Gripping the bench tightly, Yaya began to tear pieces off it.

“Calm down. Don’t destroy the school property.”

“I can’t bear it after all!!”

Her hair rising up, she howled towards the heavens.

Faltering in the face of Yaya’s malice-filled strength, Sigmund spoke,

“You are extremely humanlike, and Raishin is a man who treats automaton fairly. From my point of view, the reason why he’s not yielding to your charms is not a problem of whether you’re human or automaton... you see?”

Yaya tilted her head, slightly confused.

“What do you mean?”

“In other words, this might be a little delicate but your human nature is a little— Get down!”

“Huh?”

She didn’t make it in time. With a dull and heavy sound, something hit Yaya directly.

It was an attack akin to an enormous hammer blow.

A large amount of blood spurted out like a fountain all over the place as Yaya was smashed through the bench and sent flying back quite a distance.

Part 3

A shiver ran up Raishin's spine.

The voice was barely above a whisper, but it was openly hostile. The enemy's presence was- right above them!

Throwing himself forward, he spun around.

Glancing up, there was a protrusion over the door, and something black had been enshrined there.

"... Rabi?"

It was a dog. It looked like a wolf with twitching pointed ears.

Komurasaki was also surprised, her eyes widening,

"The doggie, talked...?"

"Yes, I am a dog. Yes, I talk."

The dog stared coldly down at the two of them— no, that wasn't right. Its eyes were strangely closed. Its thick eyelids were closed, but it was staring at the spot where they were like it knew something.

“But, that's another matter entirely. You know dogs are extremely territorial, right? Entering into my domain without permission, shouldn't you brats at least have the courtesy to introduce yourself?”

It sounded like an old lady. Even the words she chose were old lady like.

In an instant, Raishin thought that she was similar to Sigmund. However, although Sigmund possessed intelligence as well, he at least appeared to be younger. This dog, on the other hand, seemed to have no life left in her, like an old man at death's door.

Raishin closely observed the dog— then did a slight bow while introducing himself.

“Sorry about that. I am Akabane Raishin, and I hail from Japan.”

“Wait, Raishin!”

Komurasaki was panicking. The old dog went “Oh?”, with admiration in her voice.

“I see you don't do things half-assed, brat. Announcing your name, even though you're an intruder.”

“Well, you said it was the right thing to do.”

“My intelligence, as well as my ability to speak is on par with humans. I wonder, is that lucky or unlucky for you brats?”

“You being able to speak makes things much easier then. How were you able to detect our presence?”

“Such a bold brat. Not only do you have the cheek to sneak in, you’re brazenly asking for secrets on how this magic art works.”

The old dog was looking at Raishin with amusement- no, that wasn’t right. Her eyes were still closed. However, her nose was pointed in the direction of Komurasaki and Raishin, and her head was angled downwards “like she was looking at them”.

And then, she readily answered him.

“I have a special sensor built into me.”

“But Komurasaki’s hidden form is flawless. You shouldn’t be able to see our shadows, or hear us, or sense anything about us at all.”

“A passive sensor might be fooled, but my sensor is an active one.”

“Active?”

Raishin tilted his head in puzzlement, but Komurasaki seemed to have understood. She nervously started to glance around their surroundings.

“It seems the little lady over there understands.”

The old dog’s fangs were bared. It looked like she was... smiling?

“Worry not, little one. The pups are all sleeping.”

“Pups? Then those dog form automata outside, are they your children?”

“Only some. The others aren’t mine. Just now you mentioned Rabi, well, I am the prototype of the Garm series which Rabi—he is my flesh and blood son by the way—belongs to.”

“... The Sonic magic circuit.”

“Oh, you’re well-informed. Yes, we have the Sonic magic circuit installed inside us. We release sound waves, and when they bounce back off things like you, we perceive the changes in the wavelength, and we are able to see the world, as well as hear it too.”

Having heard what she said thus far, something struck Raishin.

“You’re a Bandoll, aren’t you?”

“That isn’t a term you can throw about lightly. What makes you think so?”

“I don’t sense the presence of a puppeteer nearby. Even so, you’re still able to use magic arts. The way you use your eyes and ears are also a little too realistic. Furthermore, you just said Rabi was your “son”. That implies you have living parts inside you. Or am I wrong?”

“Hoho, it would appear you’re no ordinary idiot...”

Her presence changed. Now it was chilly, and with killing intent, she spoke.

“I would just have to bark once, and you’d be in deep trouble. So, what will you do now?”

Raishin started laughing.

“... What’s so funny?”

“You’re being overly dramatic. If you really wanted to do so, you’d have done it a long time ago.”

“ ... ”

“By the way, I’ve noticed you’ve been keeping your voice down so that the other dogs won’t wake up out of consideration for us. What’s up with that?”

“... You really are a cheeky brat. But I suppose you have some wit about you as well.”

The old dog was laughing wryly. Then she spoke candidly.

“I’ve already been consigned to be disposed of. I guess that’s either lucky or unlucky, depending on who you ask. And on top of that, I’m currently imprisoned here. I have no further obligation to those people who run this place.”

“Disposal? Why?”

“What a stupid question. Isn’t it obvious? It’s because they don’t feel the need to perform maintenance on me anymore. As it is, the cost of maintaining me-”

“Don’t screw with me!”

Komurasaki drew back, surprised and frightened by Raishin’s outburst. The old dog was also surprised. Her eyelids finally opened, and she was looking at Raishin directly.

“... Sorry. The blood just rushed to my head there.”

Shaking his head, he laughed off his outburst.

“I think I’m a little old-fashioned. I hate the current trend of always bringing in efficiency, cost, and statistics into everything. I especially hate it when people try to assign a value to living things.”

Komurasaki’s eyes were filled with passion. The old dog once again stared at Raishin.

Uneased by both their gazes, Raishin was suddenly struck by an idea.

“Say. Would you like to come along with us?”

“... What did you say?”

“I bet it’s pretty tedious being cooped up in this stuffy, small space. If you follow us, then I think you’d be able to kill off your boredom, even if it’s just for a little while. And, there’s a party that’s about to start tonight as well.”

The old dog stared long and hard at Raishin, before letting out a small laugh.

“Such an interesting little brat you are. Why did you sneak in here?”

“The truth is, I’m being targeted by this girl called Frey. She’s tried to assassinate me a few times already.”

The look on her face changed. Her teeth bared, she practically growled out her next sentence.

“What is the meaning of this? What kind of relationship do you have with that girl- or rather, why is that girl behaving that way towards you? Did you do something to her?”

“I’d also like to know the answer to that question. I heard that if I came here, I’d be able to learn something.”

“ ... ”

“We have to get back to the academy by evening. So, if say, there was someone to guide us around the place, that’d be very helpful.”

There was a brief silence.

Then, she stood up. Her legs were a little wobbly, but it looked like life was returning to her. She was resting about two meters off the floor, but she jumped and easily landed next to them. Compared to the other dogs, she looked very strong and sturdy.

The old dog sat, and thrust her neck out towards Raishin.

Reinforced with metal, there was a sturdy looking collar around her neck. There was a bluish white light extended out from the collar- a magical chain, and it was attached to an iron post nearby. Forcibly drawing out magical energy to maintain the chain's integrity, it was a device to rob her of her freedom.

"Can you free me from this?"

Raishin reached into the pouch on his waist and took out a file and a saw. Because they were made to be portable, they were small and hard to use. Even so, after struggling for a few minutes, the collar came undone.

Finally free, the old dog walked over to the entrance, her tail wagging slightly.

"Follow me. I will guide you through the orphanage."

"That'd be helpful."

"However, be warned. What you will see is a glimpse into hell on earth."

Her gaze was testing them. A black dog with such intensity brought to mind a hell hound guarding the bowels of the underworld. Komurasaki shrank back, but Raishin just shrugged his shoulders, and chuckled cynically.

"Well, that's not something I'd like to see... But I need to know more about Frey's circumstances."

“So, you want to proceed?”

“Now that’s a stupid question.”

“Fine, let’s go then. But first, use your magic art on me as well.”

“Got it. ... speaking of which, we still don’t know your name.”

“Yomi.”

Of all the things to be called by, she had the same name as the river that guided people on to the underworld, Yomi, as well.

Raishin thought that her name was uncannily suitable.

Before long, they found themselves next to the hell she had spoken of.

Part 4

A little ways from the central auditorium, the doctor's office was located inside the medicine faculty.

The academy was considered the highest institute for education in Machinart in the world of magic arts, but that being said, its students still numbered in the thousands. The doctor's office had many consultation rooms, but there was only one in-house doctor stationed there permanently.

Currently, there was a female academic instructor clad in a white coat standing in front of that office.

Needless to say, that lady was Kimberly. She was lugging along a trunk that looked very heavy.

Kimberly knocked on the door, and the bustle of activity inside was immediately followed by an unnatural silence.

(Don't tell me... I was too late?)

Placing the trunk down on the floor, Kimberly reached into her inner pocket.

Quietly removing a dagger, she prepared to kick the door and rush in... but before she could do so, the door was opened from the inside.

A half-dressed girl burst out from the previously closed door.

Her upper body was dishevelled, and she was clutching her undergarments closely within her chest in an attempt to hide them from sight.

Watching the female student's figure as it retreated into the distance, Kimberly let out a long sigh. Putting away the dagger, she picked up the heavy trunk, and entered into the office.

There was a doctor inside, whistling innocently as he gathered some medical records together.

If he was ten years younger, he would have been considered a handsome young man. He looked a little worn out, but his good looks were more or less intact. Black frames adorned his face, and his necktie was fitted snugly around his collar. The whole appearance gave off a scholarly vibe, but he definitely wasn't a delicate flower type. His gaze was sharp, and had a dreadful intensity to them.

Kimberly gave him the coldest of looks.

"As incorrigible as always, Doctor."

"No, no, this is a misunderstanding, professor. I was obviously treating her. Think about it. We're in the middle of lessons now, right? I needed to use the stethoscope, so I had her remove her top."

“Save it. I’m not here to interrogate you over your private matters. But, I’d advise you not to walk alone at night. It’d be terrible if that thing dangling between your legs were to mysteriously drop off, am I right?”

His handsome face withered, and he closed his legs shut. Somewhat angrily, he turned towards Kimberly.

“If you’re not here to pry then what the hell do you want!? You’re ruining my fun here. Are you having abdominal pains? Is it menstrual cramps? If you’re having menopausal troubles I suggest you consult a private doctor elsewh—”

Whoosh, a pair of scissors on the table flew towards him.

Naturally, it was Kimberly who threw it, lightning quick and with great dexterity.

It grazed the doctor’s forehead and embedded itself into the wall.

“I really think you should hold your useless tongue for a while, don’t you think? Or perhaps it’d be better if I cut it off?”

“... I deeply apologies.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be done soon. I just wanted your opinion on something.”

“My opinion?”

“About Raishin Akabane.”

The moment she mentioned his name, the atmosphere froze instantly.

After a while, the doctor retrieved a medical record with a cold smile etched on his face.

“Whew. So, it’s finally come to this then.”

“Finally?”

“I always thought the military, or the academy, or some intelligence agency from somewhere would come knocking sooner or later.”

“... Why would you think that?”

“Well, people would be interested in the boy. After all, that troublemaker did humiliate the heir to the Kingsfort line, even managing to steal his Entry into the Night Party. Because of that, Lord Walter has lost much of his standing. Did you read this morning’s Times?”

“What a foolish question. I make it my habit to read the papers while drinking my coffee every morning.”

“Heh. To think that the little lady who never even wrote a single love letter before has grown into such a splendid woman.”

The sound of the scalpel embedding itself into the wall sent a chill down his spine.

Cold sweat started to pour from his brow.

“Back to the actual topic, please. Have you noticed anything about **Second Last?**”

Wiping the sweat away, the doctor stared hard at Kimberly, before sighing in resignation.

“His wounds heal very slowly.”

“Hm... Now that you mentioned it, he did say the same thing himself.”

“He has very slow hematopoiesis, his cell division is also slow, and his nutritional absorption rate is bad.”

“... What’s going on with him?”

Holding up a hand to stop the perplexed Kimberly, he continued on.

“However, those were only applicable to the results from the first few days he was here. Subsequently his rate of recovery was normal. No, actually, if we compared it to all the lords and ladies studying in this academy, his constitution is actually superb. His wounds heal right before your eyes.”

“... In other words?”

“The results we’re seeing now is his baseline rate of recovery. It’s only directly after a battle that his recovery rate is drastically impaired. It would appear that his “healing power” is being consumed by something else. That’s right- it’s like collecting on a bill. Bills are such a scary thing, right professor?”

“Don’t bring in weird things into this. What’s your diagnosis?”

“Something is leeching away his life force.”

“— something like an automata needing energy to repair itself, am I right?”

“Thinking like that is only natural. But, normally you’d use magic energy for that. Using life force for something like that would be plain weird.”

“In that case, what do you make of it?”

“No, I’m not saying that you’re wrong. Unless it’s some sort of curse from a third party, or a new strain of disease I’ve never heard of before, the only answer is that his automaton is draining his life force.”

“However... Is something like that even possible?”

“I don’t see anything strange about it. In fact it’s pretty much the norm. If you are the owner of a Bandoll, that is.”

Kimberly silently locked the door, and sat down on a chair.

“Tell me the details. Now.”

Her interest was piqued. She might not have been aware of it herself, but her eyes were shining with a mysterious light.

The doctor sighed, and stared at Kimberly with pity in his eyes.

“You’re dragging yourself into another mess again.”

Kimberly feigned ignorance, “Whatever are you talking about?”

“I saw the thesis you wrote for your doctorate. “Practical application of Machinart for the purpose of Anti-Machine warfare” - a rather straightforward theme.”

“Are you trying to find faults with my thesis? Well, reflecting upon it now, I guess it was lacking in content somewhat, and I suppose some parts were shoddily written...”

“I’m saying nothing of that sort. I’m telling you the thesis itself was bad. Even as a researcher, there are lines you shouldn’t cross. Anyone who saw your thesis understood straightaway. It was treading dangerously into forbidden research.”

It was clear from the expression on Kimberly’s face that she wasn’t interested in his sermon.

All the more the doctor was determined to make her listen, and carried on.

“The fact that you’ve become a professor at the academy is already an achievement you can be proud of. You should quit that questionable line of research, and start searching for your own happiness.”

“And I suppose your happiness is making passes at the female students?”

“That’s right, other than this, I— No, enough about me. I’m telling you to go out, reclaim and enjoy your youth, Amy.”

“Call me Miss Kimberly please, doctor. The girl named Amy already died during that war. Besides... it’s a little unfortunate, but I can’t end up as a simple researcher anymore. Even if that was what I wanted.”

“... What do you mean by that?”

Kimberly raised the trunk that was by her feet, and slammed it onto the table.

Unlocking it, she threw it open.

Inside the trunk, packed tightly such that there wasn't even the slightest gap, were stacks of banknotes.

The doctor's jaw dropped.

"I want you to keep a close eye on Raishin Akabane. Obviously, this will be an exclusive agreement between the both of us. And from this point onwards, you can essentially consider the British government and the academy to be your enemies."

A devilish grin surfacing on her face, Kimberly asked.

"So, doctor, would you prefer this money, or would you rather get a sniper bullet as recompense for your co-operation?"

"... That's a stupid question, professor."

The doctor laughed. Meeting Kimberly's sharp gaze with his own, "Of course I'll take the money."

His honeyed voice was dripping with sycophancy.

Part 5

“This is Frey’s room.”

Yomi guided Raishin and Komurasaki up to the second floor of the orphanage.

The second floor was comprised of small rooms lined up in an orderly fashion, much like a dormitory for students. It appeared that the south-eastern room was Frey’s.

Opening the door, Komurasaki stepped in and went “wow~” with wonder in her voice.

There was a photograph stuck to one wall.

It was a picture of a cheerful boy and a smiling girl. There was also a married couple smiling gently.

Raishin was drawn to the girl. She was smiling innocently. This was a Frey from long before Raishin had met her. Right now her face was full of joy; it was a look that he couldn’t imagine the current Frey wearing. There was no trace of fear on her face at all.

It was only natural that Frey could smile, all humans could. But ironically, just as Raishin was shocked that she could actually smile, he was reminded of the fact that the current Frey never smiled at all.

Family. Something Raishin had lost. It had been stolen from him.

And Frey too, had lost her family.

The siblings in the picture were very young. This photo was probably taken before they had entered the orphanage.

“Frey’s parents were extremely skilled puppeteers... or so I heard.”

Yomi spoke with some sadness in her voice as she looked up at the photo.

“They were in an American troupe performing puppet shows for the public.”

“...Is Frey her real name?”

“No, it’s her identification code. It was given to her after she came here. Even I don’t know her real name.”

“How did her parents die?”

“They lost control of the automata they were handling, and it went on a rampage. This was right in the middle of the show, mind you. The audience were showered in the mother’s blood.”

“... Did Frey tell you that herself?”

Yomi nodded silently in confirmation.

Komurasaki covered her mouth with her hands. Her eyes gradually became moist and trembled, with tears forming.

For such an innocent girl to witness such a tragic accident firsthand; Raishin was at a loss for words.

His mind replayed a flashback of his past. The sea of blood and fire. And then his sense of loss. Was Frey holding on to the same pain that he had gone through...?

“I don’t know the details or anything about her trying to kill you... but luckily or unluckily for her, Frey has always been a gentle girl. ”

Yomi solemnly told Raishin.

“She was always nice to us too. Every day, she’d spend her precious break time coming over to brush our fur. Having had nothing but nutrition tablets all our lives, she fed us meat.”

Yomi’s fur was frayed, and her coat had no gloss to it.

In other words, there was no one in this facility whose responsibility was to brush their fur.

“Of course everyone loved her. However because of that, she ended up being chosen.”

“...To be Rabi’s master?”

“That’s right. She went through about five thousand hours’ worth of lessons and practice before finally entering the academy.”

Five thousand hours in one year was no joke. Raishin couldn’t imagine going through such a long period of time.

“... I still don’t know if this whole ordeal was a lucky or unlucky thing for her.”

Raishin stared at the girl in the photo, burning the image of her smile into his retina, before answering Yomi.

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing. After all, someone like you was around, so at least she had some good family.”

Yomi’s eyes widened before chuckling slightly.

Men in white coats walked up and down the hallway Raishin and the others were cautiously passing through.

The next place Yomi brought them to was the first floor of a different building. It was the one with the steel bars over the windows.

The inside of the building gave off the same vibe as a school. There were large rooms that appeared to be classrooms along with blackboards installed on the walls and even a field for P.E.

In the middle of what looked to be the dining hall of the school, an unbelievable sight greeted Raishin's eyes.

"They weren't lying when they said this was an orphanage... But still..."

Cold sweat formed on his skin and he looked around the room.

(What the hell is going on here...!?)

The children sat side by side in neat rows, systematically consuming their meal. Bread and soup. A salad and meat looked to be the menu of the day. No one was talking and the children silently carried on with their meal like a bunch of robots.

All of the children had one peculiarity.

They all had pearl hair and red pupils.

They were exactly the same as Frey and Loki!

“I would like to say all of them are siblings... but something like that isn’t possible at all.”

Although they had the same color of hair and eyes, their faces and bodies were all different.

Frey and Loki resembled each other. However they didn’t resemble any of the children here. In addition, they didn’t appear inside the photo in Frey’s room. It was highly unlikely that they were blood-related to her.

A separate race then? Or a unique ethnic group?

Or was this a place for a specific group to gather...?

No, that wasn’t likely. There was no way something like this could happen so conveniently!

“They’re the Promised Children.”

Yomi answered Raishin’s doubts.

It was the first time he had heard of such a term. Yomi was surprised by the blank look on Raishin's face,

"I never thought there would be a person in the academy who doesn't know what they are. Within the human race, there are those with a strong affinity for magic energy. For every hundred thousand babies, only one will be born."

"Hey now... Wasn't this an orphanage?"

"They are all orphans, there's no mistake about it. They've been gathered from all over – Britain itself, the continent and as far as the India subcontinent."

"Still, they're supposed to be one-in-a -hundred-thousand, and for so many to be conveniently in one orphanage..."

"They're not the real thing...is what you want to say?"

"...!"

Was that really the case then?

Komurasaki was staring in puzzlement, but Raishin had already begun to understand.

But could something like that be done?

Was it possible? Was it even allowed?

Turning her back on them, Yomi said in a low, muted voice.

“Let’s go. There’s something more repulsive I want to show you.”

Heading down a set of gloomy stairs, they descended underground.

The damp air chilled their lungs. There was an unnatural smell of blood in the air which caused a queasy feeling in their chests.

Raishin noticed Komurasaki was lagging slightly behind him.

“What’s wrong, Komurasaki?”

“I... I’m a little scared.”

Her little shoulders were shaking. She looked like she had some sort of evil premonition.

“Sorry about this, but you know that you can’t go back by yourself.”

He reached out and grabbed her hand.

“There, I’ve got you. If you’re really scared, then just close your eyes.”

“Ok... Thanks. I think I feel a little braver now. Because I’m together with Raishin.”

Holding hands, they chased after Yomi.

A rather ferocious looking Doberman was sitting in the middle of the staircase, on guard.

If it sank its teeth into them they’d be goners for sure... but the Doberman had no reaction to them. It looked like it didn’t possess the ability to switch on its active sensor. Much like Rabi, it looked like it only possessed the intelligence of an ordinary dog.

“What lies before us is the most important part of this facility. Not even the staff members are allowed to enter.”

Yomi hopped off the last step. At the end of the staircase, a large iron door was set in place.

As they approached it, a cutting blast of cold air hit them.

This was probably an icehouse... or something.

The ice and snow from winter could be replicated and maintained through magic arts. The recent trend was a combination of circulation of the atmosphere inside combined with heavy insulation on the outside that proved very effective.

From what they could see from the door itself, this place was designed to be airtight. The construction was relatively modern as well. The interior temperature was probably below freezing point.

Raishin reached into his pouch again, drawing out his lock picking tools and began to work on the door.

Working in silence, he managed to get the door open.

Breathing in the extremely cold air hurt his nose. Inside it, it was so cold that he started shivering. It was so cold he could feel his skin becoming tight and drawn. Just like he thought, this place was a freezer.

“What is this place?”

“A storehouse where they keep meat.”

Yomi answered, but they couldn't see her. The inside of the icehouse was pitch black.

“Any sort of light here would attract attention. You’ll just have to wait and adapt to the darkness. “

Komurasaki was clinging tightly to Raishin’s back, pressing her small frame against his body. Gradually his eyes became adjusted to the darkness. Light was leaking in from somewhere and the thing before him gradually came into sight.

“...!”

He let out a cry unconsciously. Standing next to him, Komurasaki was stunned.

Glass cases were lined up in rows.

Filled with antifreeze, what was floating amidst the machinery inside them were-

Arms.

Legs.

They were all small in size. Slender. Hadn’t matured yet.

It was the bodies of numerous children.

“What... the hell... is this...!?”

It was a truly stupid question to ask. He could feel the bile rising up his throat. Even for Raishin, this was too much to bear. At the moment he turned away, a shrill bell rang out and there was some noise on the other side of the door.

“Raishin! There are a lot of footsteps heading this way!”

Komurasaki shouted out to him in an urgent voice.

Chapter 4 – Rescued Life

Part 1

The sight of a bloodied Yaya being blasted backwards was seen by Shouko, who was on the balcony.

Nimbly adjusting her field of vision, she looked for the assailant.

Judging from the way Yaya was thrown back, she calculated the angle and location the assailant shot from. She cast her eye on the nearby school building and caught sight of something.

Something pearly white was giving off a reflection.

A lone white haired student was standing at the edge of a window in the medical faculty.

The inside of the building was dark, so she couldn't see anything apart from the hair. However, there didn't seem to be enough space inside to contain a large cannon like object.

"Aren't you going to repair her?"

It was a comment from out of the blue. Shouko slowly turned her head around.

Standing there was a professor clad in a white coat, none other than Kimberly.

She had a provocative look on her face. Her two eyes were focused right on Shouko.

Shouko laughed lightly and tried to say something to her.

Kimberly had an amused look on her face, “So you can conceal sound as well. Sorry, but won’t you at least drop the barrier so I can hear you, Miss Karyuusai?”

Shouko dispelled the hidden form magic art with another light laugh. The students nearby jumped up like startled deer. Considering that a kimono-clad beauty just materialized before them, their shock was understandable.

“Good day to you, Professor Kimberly. I guess my boy’s been giving you some trouble, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah and that one is really such a problematic brat. His memory’s bad, his attitude leaves much to be desired and as a bonus, he can’t keep his hands to himself.”

“Oh my, even as far as the ladies?”

“Secretly sneaking out of the academy like that, you have to wonder where he is and what he’s up to. Look, it’s because of that kind of behavior that your prized automaton is now in that sad state.”

“From the way you speak, you sound like you know who’s responsible for that.”

The atmosphere became strained. The surrounding students gulped as both women stared at each other.

After a moment, the first person to break the tension was Kimberly.

“This interview can wait till next time. More importantly, that automaton below us.”

Jerking her chin she gestured towards the fallen Yaya, lying in a pool of her own blood inside the garden.

“Go on, go repair her. I don’t think you can afford to lose her just yet, right?”

“Your concern is appreciated. However, it is unnecessary. That child is not as weak as you think.”

“Your automata, maybe. What about Second Last?”

“I am talking about that child. My boy won’t die so easily.”

In a voice full of confidence, she elegantly stood up.

And then she bowed with a grace so beautiful it deserved to be on stage.

“Good day to you, Professor Kimberly. Send my regards to Father Time.”

After a brief glance down at Yaya, she departed without any further action. Shouko’s figure once again filled with magic energy and disappeared from the naked eye. And once again, the students were left dumbfounded.

Kimberly watched her disappearing figure and smiled wryly.

“What a mysterious lady. Then again, I guess I don’t have the right to call anyone that.”

A single drop of sweat was shining on her forehead.

Part 2

It was probably some sort of alarm. The bell continued to ring loudly.

Sounds of activity could be heard from above the ceiling. Most likely, they had begun to hunt for the intruders. After a few moments, like Komurasaki said, the footsteps could be heard descending the stairs.

“Raishin, what...what do we do?”

As she hugged Raishin’s arm tightly, her legs were trembling.

Had Komurasaki’s hidden form magic art been broken?

Or perhaps, this icehouse was rigged with a barrier that triggered an alarm when an intruder was detected.

“Yomi. How many others can detect us like you can?”

“If they’re under the control of a puppeteer, then all Garm units should be able to do so.”

In short, there was an extremely high chance they were in danger of being captured.

“Komurasaki. Can you fool that active sensor thing?”

“I can, but... It’s difficult. I can’t extend the effect to you.”

It was an answer he expected. Raishin felt his stomach twist into a knot.

“In that case, the only option left is to break through them.”

“You really are a bold little brat. However your simple-mindedness will only get you killed.”

“Do you have some sort of plan?”

“Stupid boy. Of course we’re going to escape.”

The footsteps were getting closer. Narrowing her eyes at the flustered Raishin, Yomi walked further into the room with unsteady steps.

“Look here. This thing opens.”

She was pointing at a spot on the floor. Raishin crouched down, and felt around with his hands.

There was a slight bump. It felt like some sort of metal plate. It seemed to be some part of a mechanism because it was surprisingly light for its thickness and easy to lift and open. Yet when released, it slowly closed shut on its own.

There was an empty cavern below and obviously, nothing could be seen.

It was like an entrance to hell. A slightly unnatural sound of something flowing could be heard coming from it.

“Is this a secret escape route?”

“No. This is a garbage disposal.”

“Garbage disposal? Wait, then where does this lead to-”

He never got to finish his sentence. He felt a kick behind, and suddenly his body was flying through space.

He felt fear and shock reflexively, as well as a sense of floating.

He fell for an extremely long time through the hole, for what felt like a full minute to him. Of course that wasn't true. In actual fact he took just three seconds before landing with a splash.

Just as the sound suggested, he was in the middle of a body of water. His feet couldn't touch the floor, he couldn't see anything and worse of all, the current was fast!

"It's cold!"

"Don't chatter needlessly!"

Yomi rammed into him. Komurasaki seemed to have also landed in the water, because there was a splash behind him.

The temperature of the water felt like it couldn't be anything above five degrees. His only consolation was that he hadn't suffered any cardiac arrests yet. However, the extremities of his body were quickly becoming numb and he could feel his warmth slowly disappearing.

(This isn't good...!)

He was a proficient swimmer but since his clothes were currently soaked with freezing water, sooner or later he'd drown. He hurriedly kicked off his shoes and removed his harness. The loss of his tools were regrettable, but he valued his life more.

"Where does this lead to? How long will it take us to get there? Can we lose our pursuers?"

“Don’t ask everything at once. Firstly, this leads to the sewers below Machine City- or that’s what they say.”

“So we’re relying on hearsay? And it’s a sewer!?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. And at the speed we’re going, we should be out of here pretty soon. Of course, we’ll only lose them if there’s a big number of fools up there.”

There was the possibility that they’d go ahead of them and lie in wait. Or even possibly chase after them.

Even then, they had no choice but to swim onwards.

Yomi dog paddled as she pushed on, with Raishin riding the currents and swimming in a breaststroke. Komurasaki was surprisingly fine, even with her kimono on as she seemed to be swimming on unhindered by it.

“...I’m sorry, Komurasaki.”

Komurasaki was surprised by his sudden statement. A bewildered look flashed across her face.

“Even with a fine automaton like you, we still ended up in this pathetic state. Because of my lack of skill, now you might even get stolen by them. Now that the situation is like this, I...”

“That’s not true! It’s not your fault, Raishin! And also, this is at least half my fault.... I think. I knew that this would be dangerous...”

“I’m just a bastard that can only curse my own incompetence. Shouko already made all the secret preparations, and I still wasn’t able to learn anything. I still have no clue whatsoever why Frey is targeting me.”

The only thing he knew for sure was that D-Works was up to some shifty research.

That much was already clear to the military. Shouko had specifically dispatched Raishin here, which meant that there was something else she was expecting from him, something he was suited for.

“Damn it! It’s because of screw-ups like these, I’m called Second Last!”

“You’re Second Last!?”

Yomi exclaimed in a startled voice. Even within the darkness, her eyes were shining. Faced with her sudden surge of hostility, Raishin was taken aback.

“...So what if I am. What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?”

“You want to know why Frey’s trying to eliminate you?”

In a low voice like she was trying to hold something back, Yomi sighed.

“It’s very simple. If she lost to you, the programmer would be frozen.”

“Programmer? What programmer?”

“The production of the Garm series.”

Raishin remembered Charl’s words. The competition to decide who would be supplying the British army with next generation technology- D-Works was one of the participants.

“So then, Rabi is really being tested in the Night Party?”

“Yes. It’s a field test for his performance and also to collect data.”

“If Rabi loses, then what?”

“Then obviously, D-Works will submit a different model for consideration.”

In the back of Raishin’s mind, the image of an automaton bearing wings floated to the top.

“Cherubim...”

“You look like you know about it. The Angel series are automata developed by a different research laboratory. On a one-to-one comparison, it far surpasses the combat ability of the Garm series. Because it’s made up of inorganic components, it’s easy and straightforward to maintain. The only problem is that the cost to produce it is high, and it’s difficult to control. Only an extremely skilled puppeteer can handle it.”

When he had previously seen it in action, Cherubim itself seemed very raw, close to a wooden puppet. If you wanted it to perform complicated maneuvers, you’d probably need a very delicate sense of control.

“On that point, The Garm series is easy even for a newbie puppeteer to control. For better or worse, it’s just a dog. Maintenance might be problematic, but it’s cheap to produce so you can use it then dispose of it when you’re done.”

Raishin frowned. Use and dispose. Those were despicable words to him.

“If the Garm programmer is halted, what will happen to the dogs in the shed?”

“Obviously, they will be disposed of.”

With that answer, all the pieces fell into place.

If she couldn’t prove the usefulness of the series at the Night Party, all the dogs would be disposed of.

That was the reason. This was the circumstances that forced her to try and “assassinate” Raishin!

(Damn... this kind of reason-)

“Raishin!”

His bitter sentiments were cut short by Komurasaki’s shout.

Ahead of them, something could be seen amidst the darkness.

It was a shaky light. Faintly illuminating the darkness was the light from a lamp!

He felt an immense killing intent. Clutching Komurasaki’s head close to his chest, he dived under water.

And not a moment too soon, for something skimmed over their heads. Short swords embedded themselves into the walls, causing water to evaporate as it passed by.

The second round wasn’t imminent. The opponent seemed to have lost sight of them. Whether it was because of the darkness, or because of Komurasaki’s hidden form, the enemy didn’t notice Raishin. In any case, Raishin closed the distance between them while underwater and reaching from the bottom, he kicked himself up flying out of the water.

His aim was perfect, for he appeared right in front of his opponent.

As he thought, the enemy was a puppeteer. An automaton resembling a mannequin was following behind him. Although it had a different form from Cherubim, its arms were covered in countless thorn-like short swords.

His kick cleanly connected. The puppeteer, not having the time to block was sent flying, crashing and falling flat onto the floor.

The automaton froze like it had encountered some sort of error. Just like Cherubim, independent action didn't seem to be one of the strong points of its software. Raishin sent it tripping flat onto the floor, and just when he bent down to pluck out one of the short swords in its arms-

The sound of a gunshot rattled his eardrums with a loud bang.

There was a dull feeling in his side. It might have grazed him... but he had no way of knowing. Nevertheless, the adrenaline and the numbness from the cold water prevented him from feeling any pain. Raishin quickly sprang up, turning to face his new opponent.

It was a man in black. His gun was pointed their way. It didn't look like an automaton was accompanying him.

Raishin kicked off the floor, leaping towards the man.

At that moment, his knees gave way.

The cold water had robbed him of more of his strength than he thought. His legs were numb and moved sluggishly.

Raishin was startled. The barrel was right in front of his eyes. This... this was a dangerous situation, right?

A split second later, the flash of the barrel filled the tunnel.

Part 3

“Yaya. Wake up, Yaya.”

After hearing her name being called several times, Yaya slowly opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was a small, steel-colored dragon.

“Uh... Sigmund...?”

Gradually, her consciousness returned to her.

At the same time, a sudden sharp pain assailed her. It felt like countless needles were all being stabbed into her at the same time. Glancing at the place where the pain was coming from, Yaya was shocked.

Where the intestinal area should have been, there was a large hole instead.

“Yaya, how’re you feeling? Are you alright- that’s not likely but still, how’s your condition?”

“This... is still within my limits... I don’t think I’ll shut down just yet...”

“That’s good. You did well to survive taking a blow like that.”

He gestured to her side. Lying there was an acorn shaped projectile. Sigmund had probably dug it out of Yaya's body. It was covered in blood, but the front was smooth, and had no blemishes on it.

"Yaya is... The world's greatest, automaton... Something like this... is barely a scratch."

She tried to smile, but ended up coughing up blood instead.

"Don't overdo it. I'll get a technician to come over right away."

"No... It's fine. Yaya is, a bit... different, from normal automata."

"This isn't the time for bravado- wait; you're talking about your construction, aren't you?"

"Yes... Normal repairs won't... work... on Yaya."

"In that case, what should I do?"

"Raishin... I want to meet... Raishin..."

She broke off into a sob. Her weakness was probably also causing her emotions to become unstable. Yaya was crying like a little child would.

“I see. So his magic energy is our best bet.”

It looked like there was no other choice but to rely on her self-repair mechanism. As Sigmund was troubled as he tried to come up with something, he suddenly noticed a presence approaching the bench.

It was a beautiful female student with golden hair. Her arms and legs were tensed unnaturally and she was restlessly looking about for something.

“Charl. I’m over here.”

“Sigmund! Don’t just go and disappear like that! I’m going to downgrade your lunch from chicken to shrimp! Do you know how worried I was!? What was that sound just now? Don’t just go wandering around on your own!”

“Calm down. I understand what you want to say, but this isn’t the place for it.”

Charl had drawn closer while firing off like a machine gun- when she suddenly jumped back.

“What, this... what happened!?”

“You came at a good time. Let’s give her a hand.”

“Give her a hand... this situation calls for a doctor!”

The smell of blood was causing her to become anemic herself.

“What are the people in Japan thinking?! She’s more of a living creature than Sigmund is!”

“In this case, if the designer himself isn’t here, we can’t repair her. In other words-”

“She requires magic energy. I know.”

Trying as much as possible not to look at the wound, Charl rolled up her sleeves.

Extending her hands towards Yaya, she focused her concentration. Bluish-white light began to gather in her palms, and flowed out into Yaya- and almost immediately, her shoulders started shaking violently.

“What... is... this, I... ahhhhhh!”

Something was clearly wrong. Sigmund braced himself, and rammed himself into Charl, knocking her back.

The flow of magic energy broken, Charl’s will was hers once more.

Staring at her hands, her nails were bleached and her fingertips had become dry.

The moisture in them had disappeared, and their complexion was bad. It was like staring at an old woman's hands.

"Don't... overdo it, please..."

Seeing through Charl's horror, Yaya weakly mumbled.

Charl huffily sat down in front of Yaya again.

"Don't be stupid. Something at this level is nothing for someone like me."

"But... Charlotte is... an enemy..."

"I am Charlotte of the noble house of Belew, whose family crest the queen herself conferred the unicorn onto. I vowed that we would fight against each other at the Night Party fair and square."

"But... I don't want to be indebted to a vixen..."

"You talk back too much. Just be quiet and let me heal you!"

Gathering her spirit, she began to summon her magic energy.

Once she had gathered enough, her flesh didn't waste away like before. However, in exchange for that, her magic energy was being stolen from her at a rapid rate before her eyes. Even for someone like Charl, she felt her breathing become strained.

Despite that, she continued to focus her magic energy that she was so proud of. Yaya's body began to heal immediately, mending her wound at an alarming speed.

"That's enough...!"

A voice brought her back to her senses. When she finally noticed it, the skin over Yaya's wound had grown back.

"Thank you very much Charlotte. Yaya is fine now."

Charlotte sank down onto the ground, exhausted.

At some point in time, a crowd had gathered around them. Members of the Public Morals Committee had also gathered. They quickly sealed off the area and began interviewing witnesses.

Flying from that area, a little dragon fluttered his wings as he landed.

“Sigmund. Where did you run off to?”

“I went searching. Although I didn’t find anything.”

He turned to look at the projectile. Charl and Yaya done the same.

“...This must weigh at least seventy pounds. Something that can fire this can only be cannon and it has to be a pretty big one at that. I wonder where someone could set one up?”

“It doesn’t have to be cannon. It’s shaped like a projectile but there aren’t any rifling marks, are there?”

Just like Sigmund said, the bullet was spotless.

“Unless they were on a glider, it would appear that the enemy has some sort of firing mechanism that doesn’t require a physical barrel.”

“So, you’re saying that the insolent guy who shot this is able to strike from any location?”

“That’s probably the case- oh, this is not good.”

Sigmund’s voice abruptly hardened.

“It would be infinitely easier to target someone outside of the academy. It’s a possibility that the enemy-or enemies- goal is to force Raishin to withdraw.”

Her consciousness still hazy, Yaya tilted her head in puzzlement.

Charl grabbed Yaya’s shoulders impatiently, shaking her.

“Raishin’s in danger! If he got hit by something like this, even a barbaric pervert like him would be crushed flat!”

“...Raishin!”

Yaya wanted to dash off, but she fell awkwardly. Her strength wasn’t back yet.

Charl and Sigmund hurriedly helped her up. Amidst the throng of people, a maiden with pearl hair was watching the whole affair with a pale look on her face.

Part 4

The gunshot echoed throughout the sewer.

Soon after that, a cry of pain could be heard.

However, the one yelling wasn't Raishin, but the man in front of him. The old dog had sunk her fangs into his arm. At that moment, Raishin grabbed the gun from him and kicked him into the current.

—However, that was a careless thing to do.

He had subconsciously assumed that there were only two enemies.

There was magic energy building up behind him. By the time he had noticed it, it was too late. Time slowed to a crawl, and everything seemed to be in slow motion.

Behind him was a mannequin-like automaton and a puppeteer. Four short swords launched from its shoulders, flying straight towards Raishin.

He couldn't react in time. It was useless. He was going to die!

At that moment, a black shadow hopped into his field of sight.

The short swords collided into it with a dull thud. At the moment of impact, there was a tearing sound.

The swords lost their momentum, and their trajectory was changed, so none hit Raishin.

He didn't have time to think. Without any hesitation, Raishin fired at the puppeteer.

He hadn't fired a gun since military training. Not to mention that it was dark, yet the bullet still found its mark. Hitting the puppeteer's thigh, the puppeteer writhed in agony.

He wouldn't die, but he wasn't in any state to use magic arts.

Ignoring the mannequin that had grounded to a halt, Raishin dashed over to the black shadow-Yomi.

At one glance he could see she was in terrible shape.

Her bottom half was gone. He didn't know how the swords hit her, but it had sliced clean through. If she were a real dog she would have died instantly, but since Yomi was an automaton, she was still conscious.

Protruding from her upper half were a few cords. However, the smell wafting over was unmistakably that of blood. The cords had been inserted into and were surrounded by real flesh!

The truth dawned upon him. Yomi's body was largely still made up of organic parts.

No, this was more like the reverse—

“Hang in there. Why did you protect me? If I had died, wouldn't Frey have won by default?”

Yomi laughed in response.

He didn't have time to thoroughly check her condition. The sounds of battle had drawn the attention of the others, and their footsteps were closing in. He could see three, four lamps in the distance. There looked like a lot of them. If they were discovered, it would be the end.

“Raishin, there's a ladder here! We can go up to the surface using this!”

Komurasaki was pointing to a spot in the darkness near them.

“I'm going to carry you, Yomi. I might shake a little, so try to endure-”

Yomi bit Raishin's arm, and he dropped her.

“Get out of here... you brats...!”

The light was fading from Yomi's eyes, and her pupils were dilating.

She could no longer preserve her existence. Her Eve's Heart had been broken. Raishin pumped magic energy into her, but her magic circuits weren't responding.

"At the very end, I had... a fun... time. I need... to thank... you."

"I should be thanking you. I will definitely repay your kindness. Once we get through this--"

"Just go...!"

Strong words that were almost like an entreaty. Raishin found his hands stopping unwittingly.

"I want... to rest... here. I can be with... the children this way..."

Raishin finally understood.

Yomi had called that escape tunnel a "garbage disposal".

There was only one meaning behind that. Those people at D-Works, when they decided to dispose of the Garm units, parts which they couldn't publicly acknowledge existed were dumped into the sewers!

This canal was the graveyard of the abandoned Garm units.

“Raishin! They’re getting closer!”

“...Damn it!”

Shaking off the rending pain inside him, Raishin began to climb the ladder.

Yomi’s sacrifice shouldn’t go to waste. Fervently telling himself that, Raishin finally abandoned her.

He focused solely on climbing the ladder. About ten meters up, he felt his ears became unnaturally blocked up, and there was an explosion below him.

The ceiling in the sewers crumbled down. If he had to guess, it was Yomi’s doing. With the last of her strength, she had used her magic art to stop the enemy dead in their tracks.

(Damn it... Damn it all to hell!)

Cursing his own weakness, he ground his teeth in frustration.

Unable to do anything else, Raishin fled.

Part 5

The city of Liverpool was bathing in the warm rays of the sunset.

The solemn gates of the academy were also dyed orange.

Right below that gate, a pearl haired girl was vacantly standing there.

It was Frey. Rabi was sitting by her side.

The sentry was deliberately pointing his gun at them, but the two of them weren't bothered in the slightest, and kept staring into the distance. It looked like they were waiting for someone.

"What are you doing here?"

Abruptly, a voice cut in. Frightened, she looked behind her. Standing behind her was Loki. The hostility in his glare was scary, so she found herself averting her eyes.

"Go back to the dormitory. You're causing trouble for the sentry. Just what are you trying to do?"

"Uu... I'm waiting... for Raishin."

“He’s not coming back ever again.”

Her shock made her forget her fear, and she met Loki’s gaze again.

His face expressionless, Loki continued.

“Isn’t that good for you? He’s disappeared from this world, and you didn’t even need to get your hands dirty. With this, you should be able to participate in the Night Party without any problems.”

“He... Is he in trouble? Did something... happen?”

Her face an odd color, Frey drew closer to Loki.

“Were you responsible for the attack on his automata earlier as well, Loki?”

“And what would you do if I said I was?”

There was a dangerous glint in Loki’s eyes. His glare was intimidating. Frey trembled— then like she was ashamed of her own weakness, bit her lip and stared back defiantly at Loki.

“**Second Last** was nothing more than a filthy rat. He sneaked into our home, and tried to discover our secrets. Because of that, father ordered him to be terminated. He’s already dead.”

“Don’t just go and write off someone like that.”

Suddenly, someone interrupted. The siblings turned their heads simultaneously.

On the opposite side of the gate, with the evening sun behind him, someone stood there.

His clothes were dirty and ragged. His side was stained with blood. For some reason, he was barefoot. He looked like a shipwrecked survivor. A haggard expression on his face, he looked very different from what he normally looked like.

However, it was unmistakably Raishin.

Loki’s eyes opened in disbelief, before clicking his tongue in disgust.

Turning his back, he stormed off.

“Heh, such an antisocial person.”

“Uu... I’m sorry...”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because Loki is... my younger brother.”

“... So?”

At that moment, Rabi suddenly rose up and began sniffing Raishin’s hand with interest. He seemed to like the smell, for his tail was wagging happily.

“... It seems like he’s detected the smell of a friend off you.”

Raishin suddenly felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He desperately searched for something to say— but there wasn’t anything.

“... I have to apologize to you.”

Raishin braced himself. Bowing his head, he confessed his sin.

“Yomi is dead.”

“...!”

“I’m sorry. I dragged her into it. I... broke her out.”

Numerous questions surfaced within Frey's red eyes.

Why did Raishin know Yomi? Why had he gone to her home? And why... did Yomi die?

Frey was in a state of bewilderment, but looking at the bitter expression on Raishin's face and his grave tone, she knew one thing for sure. He wasn't lying.

Her tears began to flow.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"Let's go somewhere else. I'll tell you the details then."

"I want to hear it... but... the Night Party... is about to begin."

Wiping her tears away, Frey looked up at the clock tower. It was just past five. The Night Party began at six, but the opening ceremony was due to begin shortly.

"I see... I'm sorry then. It'll have to wait till later."

"... Thank you."

Raishin couldn't believe his ears. What did Frey just say?"

"... What... did you just say?"

"Yomi... You brought her out of her cage, right?"

"I did, but it was because of my selfishness—"

"Yomi... For many years now, she'd been shut inside there. So I think... she probably must have enjoyed herself, even if it was just a little bit..."

It was true, Yomi had said that herself. Her last moments were spent having fun.

Raishin clenched his fists tightly, to the point his knuckles turned white.

"Uu... I'll... see you later then."

Rabi by her side, Frey trudged away slowly.

Raishin could only watch her thin shoulders and the figure of her fragile back as it retreated.

"... Why won't you blame me?!"

Don't thank me. Blame me, curse me, scold me.

Say it's my fault. Yell at me!

I should be the villain, and then you can defeat me easily.

His legs feeling like lead, Raishin slowly walked back to the Tortoise dormitory.

Part 6

Returning into his room, the smell of jasmine greeted him.

“W-welcome back, Raishin <3”

Noticing Raishin’s presence, Yaya rose up. It wasn’t evening yet, but she had been sleeping on the bed. The fallen sheets revealed a swath of bandages covering her torso.

“What happened to you!?”

Raishin rushed over to the bed to check up on Yaya.

“Your body feels weirdly heavier. Were you hurt? Are you ok? Is there any pain?”

“Yaya is fine. The wound has already healed.”

Happy that Raishin was fussing over her, she was smiling happily.

—However, that all changed once she looked at Raishin’s state. Her smiling face froze up.

“Raishin, what happened to you!? You’re all beat up!”

“I tripped and fell.”

“Eh... But Komurasaki?”

“I dropped her off at an army safehouse. She’s fine.”

“That’s not what I meant! Komurasaki was with you, so why are you hurt like that!?”

“Don’t say that. Komurasaki’s not built for combat—”

“Wha—! Don’t tell me you did something weird with Komurasaki, and that’s why you ended up like that...!?”

“Don’t be stupid. Just what kind of depraved demon do you take me for?”

“No, it’s Komurasaki that’s the dangerous one. I have to check to be sure... Please take off your pants!”

“That again!? Like hell I’m going to take them off!”

Ignoring both their respective injuries, the two of them struggled with each other, before a woman’s voice cut in from behind them.

“Welcome back, boy. You’re late.”

It was Shouko. Behind her was Irori as well. Irori seemed to have been looking after Yaya, for she was carrying a wash basin in her arms.

Yaya had been clinging on tenaciously to Raishin’s waist. But at Irori’s appearance, she had released her hold and quickly behaved herself again.

Shouko gracefully sat down on a chair and stared at Raishin.

“Did you manage to find out what you wanted to know?”

“... Yeah.”

“Do you know what they are doing then?”

“... Yeah.”

“So then, you should also know why the army sent you there, and why they were doing background checks into Frey, right?”

“... It’s the army’s intelligence division at work.”

“That’s right. They wanted to know more about the research going on inside of D-Works.”

“So, after using me as a decoy, did the army learn anything?”

“Oho, pretty sharp. So you actually figured out that much.”

Laughing airily, she praised him, although Raishin didn’t feel happy about it at all.

“I won’t complain. Even though it was the military’s blunder that led to the perilous situation. ...Someone even died. Even so, two years ago, the one who saved me was Shouko. Because of that, I’m not qualified to complain about anything...!”

His shoulders were trembling. Yaya gingerly stared at Raishin.

“Blaming yourself will get you nowhere, boy. And don’t be so conceited. Even if you were a little more skilled, even if Yaya was by your side, thinking that you could have saved a dying person is mere arrogance.”

“But at that time, I—”

Shouko knocked her pipe against the windowsill, scattering some ash.

At her signal for him to drop the topic, Raishin didn't say a word further.

"Let's continue. I think you already know this by now, but that thing accompanying Frey is a Bandoll."

So, Rabi and Yomi were the same, just as he suspected.

"If you insert a human 'part' into a Machine, it is difficult to make it last for a long period of time. On the other hand, if your premise is based off using and disposing once you're done, then there is an interesting solution to that problem."

"... Inserting the parts into a living creature."

"That's right. A 'part' requires nutrients and water, both of which are readily available in an organic body. For the short period of time that the body is alive, it will be able to preserve the 'part' sufficiently."

Rabi wasn't built to resemble a dog.

He was born one, and then modified to become an automaton.

Raishin's mind replayed the flashback during the time they were in the dark basement.

The icehouse. Those numerous equipment inside. And the bodies of the children floating inside the glass cases of anti-freeze.

Was the Garm type being produced from within them?

“The Sonic circuit is a remarkable magic circuit. It can be used for scouting, stealth, and even attacking. However, because it’s so remarkable, it places a heavy strain on a normal person. If you were able to reduce the amount of magic energy required to activate the circuit, it would become more user-friendly, as well as reduce the burden on existing users.”

“So, for that they created living Machines...”

“If such a thing is employed within the British military, don’t think the higher ups in Japan will remain quiet about this.”

“Why? Isn’t England an ally?”

“For now.”

The implication was obvious. Raishin felt cold sweat running down his back.

“... What is the military thinking? Do they plan on starting a war with one of the major powers of the world?”

“You are just a dog of the military. And a dog should just quietly follow its master.”

At that, Raishin fell silent.

“If you understand the situation, I’m giving you your next set of orders. Retrieve Rabi’s magic circuit.”

“...!”

“It doesn’t have to be in one piece. But England or the academy mustn’t suspect anything. Under the cover of the Night Party, you should steal it when no one is looking. The military researchers will then perform an analysis-“

“Wait a minute! The magic circuit is tied to the Heart. If I forcibly extract it, there’s no way nothing will happen to the Heart as well.”

“Foolish child, who do you think you’re lecturing to?”

“You’re telling me to... kill... Rabi?”

“I’m not going to say it again.”

His breathing increased. Suppressing his anger, he grounded his teeth.

Yomi had become his shield, and he let her die like that-

On top of that, he was now going to steal Rabi away from Frey too?

Yomi had saved him from death, and now this was how he was going to use his rescued life?

“... It’s time. You should go. The Party is about to begin.”

Shouko was no longer smiling, but coldly ordering him to go. Her tone didn’t leave any room for refusal or defiance. Without answering her, Raishin wordlessly stripped off his clothes, putting on a fresh set of his school uniform.

Yaya was looking at Raishin with concern in her eyes, but she too didn’t say anything, silently lacing her boots on.

Having completed their preparations, Raishin was scowling at Shouko, but averted his eyes as he said,

“... Let’s go, Yaya.”

“Ok.”

Throwing on his coat, he stepped out of the room.

Part 7

The field designated for the Night Party's battle wasn't an outdoor field.

Behind the central auditorium, there was a field sandwiched between the faculty of medicine and the faculty of law. It was the current stage for battle. White stone pillars had been set into the ground in the vein of Stonehenge, demarcating the field of battle.

In front of that, students were lined up neatly in rows.

Raishin headed over while being given strange looks by those in attendance. At the head of the students, the principal was on a stand, saying, "— and I hope you all will apply yourselves diligently in all your activities."

He arrived in time to hear the ending of the opening speech. It seemed he was late for the ceremony. The professors all had stunned looks on their faces. Charl was wearing a particularly upset expression on hers, but Raishin just nonchalantly strolled behind the last line.

The only ones who were obligated to attend the ceremony were those possessing Gauntlets. Even so, those in attendance seemed to number over a thousand. However, it wasn't because the students were diligently fulfilling their duties as students. The school store had opened a mobile stand, and the vicinity had been decorated in the style of a festival. For those not battling, it was comfortable sight for them to enjoy themselves.

After the end of the principal's speech, the participants in the Night Party were lead in a pledge.

The representative was the top rank- needless to say, it was the Magnus.

The six maidens in gothic lolita dress were by his side. They looked as beautiful as flowers, but they were the Squadron. Their strength was equivalent to several battleships.

*"Gathered here, upon this hallowed ground
We make a promise by which we are bound
To guard the magic arts with our life
We pledge ourselves to eternal strife.
The kingly seat, the throne is sought.
All other else is but naught.
So as we partake in this bloody game,
We swear to uphold the Walpurgis name."*

The accompanying band played fanfare music, and the gathered crows scattered into the evening sky. The students who were watching broke into applause, and right on cue the clock tower began to chime.

Once, twice, thrice- Finally, the chime echoed for the sixth time.

"I now officially declare the commencement of the 49th Walpurgis Night."

At the same time of the principal's declaration, those with the Gauntlet in their possession put it on in unison. Having forgotten the procedure, Raishin hurriedly removed his own glove, inscribed with **Second Last**, before hastily putting it back on.

One of the female students from the executive committee stepped forward, and in an opera like voice announced, “The 100th seat, **Second Last**, please head to the stage.”

He was already being called. Raishin left the line, and passed through a wreath of flowers that seemed to function as the entrance. Stepping into the field, Yaya followed behind him.

Once he was in the center of the field, his opponent was called to the stage as well.

“The 99th seat, **Sacred Blaze**, please head to the stage.”

“What?”

The bitter feeling in his chest and his gloomy mood was blown away in an instant.

The crowd behind his back was stirring, and a youth appeared before him.

The announcer wasn’t mistaken. It was Sword Emperor Loki, one of the Rounds. The clink of metal announced that his steel automaton was right beside him.

Murder in his eyes, Loki spoke with annoyance in his voice.

"I told you to withdraw, didn't I?"

"... I told you I refused, didn't I?"

Their gazes clashed. And with that, the opening night of the Night Party began.

Chapter 5 – The Walpurgis Night

Part 1

The battle field was lit up by countless gas lights.

Light reflected off the steel of Cherubim as it sprung to life.

Loki had his hands thrust into his pockets, not lifting a hand to control Cherubim. Even then, there seemed to be a flow of magic energy maintained between them. Its giant blades aimed straight for Yaya. Yaya hurriedly dodged out of the way with a somersault.

He was testing Raishin with a surprise attack. None of the watching audience seemed to cry foul. There wasn't any such thing as unfair play once the Night Party began.

Raishin threw off his coat, and began gathering magic energy at his core.

"Our turn, Yaya. Suimei Nijuuyonshouu!"

"Roger!"

Yaya exploded forward with impressive power. Angling her body, she aimed a dropkick right at Cherubim. It was a strong attack, but Cherubim dodged it without much difficulty.

(... Just like I thought.)

Every time Cherubim moved, unnatural gusts were formed. The currents of air seemed designed to aid Cherubim's movements- was its magic circuit able to control wind?

Off balance, Yaya came under the assault of Cherubim's blade.

Yaya nimbly dodged backwards, but her opponent rapidly closed the distance between them. Before she was cornered though, Raishin released his magic energy, executing a command.

"Tenken shijuuhatsuketsu!"

Yaya's strength was reinforced. She caught the oncoming blade with her bare hand, gripping on to it tightly. Brandishing the blade in its other arm, Cherubim swung that at Yaya as well. Once again, Yaya caught it with her bare hand.

A contest of strength began between the two automata. This struggle was what Raishin was hoping for.

The moment Yaya had locked down Cherubim's twin blades, Raishin was already dashing forward.

Using Yaya's back as a step, he jumped up off her back and drove a kick straight at Cherubim's head. The neck area began to bend, wavering under the pressure. The head was its weak point!

Loki clicked his tongue. For a moment his attention turned to Raishin— which was what Raishin was aiming for.

Recoiling backwards from his kick, he gathered magic energy mid-air.

“Kouen Nijuuyonshou!”

He channeled the gathered energy over. Yaya released the blades, and began her attack.

She performed a kick, another kick, and followed up with a spinning heel kick, unleashing a fierce barrage of attacks.

Cherubim expertly maneuvered its blades to block Yaya's attacks, retreating as it did so. Its movement was smooth and fluid, like it was gliding through air, its body appearing to be unnaturally light.

Also, its movements were extremely precise. It didn't try to face Yaya's superhuman strength head on, but applied power from the sides, expertly adjusting the vector of each attack sideways, deflecting Yaya's kicks.

Raishin was astonished. Loki was really a superb puppeteer. He didn't know how much of it was due to the automaton's own initiative, but still, to pull off something like that!

His surprise caused him to lose his concentration momentarily, and in that instant several short swords had launched themselves from Cherubim's back. Slicing through the air, they flew towards Yaya.

(Telekinesis!?)

He had seen the same attack in the canal underground. It looked like this was a trick unique to D-works automata. At the speed the blades were flying though, he could tell this wasn't simple telekinesis.

It was probably a generic magic art. Something to do with the magic circuit installed inside Cherubim.

No matter how he looked at it, it had to be a magic art that could control the wind, right?

He observed the trajectory of the swords. It was something that could be easily dodged- as he was thinking that, he noticed it.

If Yaya dodged, the blades would hit him!

At some point in time, the line of fire had shifted so that he was in it. No, perhaps it had been done on purpose all along.

Attacking the puppeteer with magic arts was considered a violation of the rules, but the executive committee would not be likely to rule this as foul play. Reluctantly, Raishin ordered Yaya to guard.

The short swords hit Yaya and bounced off. Her skin showed no traces of even a scratch.

Loki frowned. Yaya's toughness was a bothersome development for him.

"Hmph. That armor of yours is a nuisance."

"Bladed objects cannot cut Yaya."

Yaya threw out her chest with pride. Loki just snorted with laughter.

"You will be, soon enough. There isn't a single thing that Cherubim cannot cut."

Taking his hands out of his pockets, for the first time in the fight Loki extended his hands out towards Cherubim.

“Cherubim— Whirl!”

[I’m ready]

An explosive gust of wind burst forth from Cherubim.

The subsequent heat haze formed caused the air around it to shimmer. The smell of something burning-something Raishin hated, and the smell of fire floated over. Cherubim was expelling hot air while floating in mid-air.

It looked like the silhouette of a grotesque angel. And all that suddenly changed.

Its shoulders, arms and blades interlocked, forming a single piece. Its body parts began to combine like pieces of a puzzle, and an instant later, the angel had taken the form of a sword.

It was a great sword as tall as an adult. Beautifully curved and double-edged, it was unexpectedly shiny, without any cloudiness in the metal. At its base the face of Cherubim could be seen, giving it an uncanny appearance.

Raishin's eyes almost fell out of their sockets. On the other hand, it also made sense in a way. He always thought the excessive steel plates made it stick out, but it turned out that they were there so that Cherubim could morph into this strange form!

Loki brought his right hand up, then swung it down.

His movements seemed to be linked with Cherubim, because the great sword began to attack. It looked like an invisible giant was swinging it around. The great sword hummed as it spun, heading towards Yaya with full force.

“— Dodge!”

Considering the weight alone, the power behind this attack was significantly different from before.

Yaya evaded, and the sword was driven into the ground, causing fissures to spread out from the impact zone. The friction generated scorched the surrounding turf.

The great sword's momentum wasn't halted, but it kept on going, slashing at Yaya once again.

Raishin hurriedly focused his magic energy. He was going to boost Yaya's power until she became extremely tough. With this, she would be able to stop even a shot from a battleship's cannon-

His confidence wavered. Abruptly he used Force on Yaya, overriding her actions.

Yaya was surprised, but she didn't resist, relinquishing control to Raishin.

He made Yaya jump back. The great sword grazed her chest, causing a string of blood to extend through the air.

Raishin was speechless. To think that there was something that could cut through Yaya's superhuman strength!

Plus, this was just a graze. If it hit her head on, this match might be over.

"Hmph. You're no fool, I'll give you that."

The great sword whirled in front of Loki. Fire burst from its tip and heated the surrounding air. It was like a fiery sword wielded by an angel taken straight from the scriptures.

Once again, the great sword began to move in preparation for attack. Raishin found himself running away without thinking.

There was a hint of frustration in Yaya's voice as she said,

“What’s wrong, Raishin!? Please give Yaya magic energy! Just now I got hurt a little, but an attack of that level is something Yaya can surely endure!”

“- Just dodge! Suimei Nijuuyonshou!”

Instead of boosting her power, Raishin was using Yaya’s superhuman strength for agility. Yaya didn’t resist, but dodged left and right at the repeated attacks from the great sword.

Before he noticed, Yaya’s back was already in front of his eyes. Having been cornered, her back was now within touching distance. There was no further room to retreat.

Unexpectedly, Raishin lost strength from his waist down.

Of course, he quickly righted himself up. However, cold sweat was running down his spine. The afternoon’s debacle had drained him of his strength and magic energy. At this rate, this fight would be bad!

Now that the situation had become unfavorable, his thoughts naturally turned to their trump card.

(If we could bring it down in one shot... No, that wouldn’t work. In this situation, it wouldn’t hit.)

In that case, what should he do then?

He turned his attention to his fingertips. Like blood flowing through blood vessels, he could feel the flow of magic energy through them. However, the flow was hopeless sloppy. Compared to him, it was simply awful.

Perhaps it was just like Yaya said. There was no other way but to stop the attack.

“Raishin! There’s no point in keeping this up any further!”

“... I got it. Tenken kyuujuurokushou!”

Placing his hand on Yaya’s back, he channeled all his magic energy into-

In that instant, Raishin was assaulted by a wave of dread, the darkness of a bottomless pit overwhelming him.

It was a mysterious sense of unease. He felt like he was falling into the darkness, feeling nothing but fear.

The great sword was falling like a lightning bolt, bearing down on Yaya. Yaya was bracing herself for the impact. Raishin was once again preparing to channel his magic energy into her.

He suddenly grabbed Yaya by the shoulder, replacing himself in her position.

Why he did that, he didn't know.

Raishin had a clear goal he was supposed to accomplish. A foe that he had to defeat at all cost. But even so, he did the unthinkable.

His body had moved on its own. It was probably because he didn't want Yaya to die.

The blade moved across his chest heavily.

The metal sliced a path from his right shoulder to his left breast. A scorching heat passed over his brain for a second, burning the sensation of pain into him. It felt like his innards were being dragged out of his body. Something did fly out from inside him, dancing about in the air. It was the charm Charl had given him, the chain having been severed by the blade.

When he came to his senses, he was slumped onto the ground, dimly aware he was staring at the grass.

He couldn't move his body. It felt cold. His body was sluggish and numb. He could feel warmth flowing out of his body, and the smell of blood assailed his nostrils.

His vision was growing blurry, and it felt like he was drifting off far away to another world.

“Raishin... Raishin...!”

There was a frantic voice calling his name. The sight of Yaya’s tear-stained face brought to mind someone from his memories.



Part 2

“... Nadeshiko?”

Her clinging on to his back made him feel bad. He removed his sister off him, but she was still unwilling to let him go, and clung to his chest this time.

“Please don’t go...!”

Raishin scratched his cheek awkwardly.

“... I said it already, didn’t I? The old man chased me out, so there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Liar!”

A sudden outburst.

“You said you’d bring me to go see the fireworks from both countries next year! You said that until Nadeshiko gets married, you’d stay by my side!”

“Don’t say that. I might not be around the house, but I can still take you to go see the fireworks.”

“Hate you...”

Drops of tears were falling off Nadeshiko’s face. She closed her eyes and shouted at Raishin.

“I hate you!”

“Ah, I see. Well then, I also hate my little sister who always can’t seem to tear herself away from her big brother.”

“...!”

Nadeshiko’s fingers lost their strength, and she let go of his clothes.

She had been hurt. Her face showed that. ‘Crap...’ thought Raishin, but it was too late. Before he could say anything else, Nadeshiko had already turned back and disappeared behind the gate.

Raishin sighed, smiled wryly, and turned his back on the family he had been born into.

It wasn't something to make a huge fuss over; it was just a childish spat.

He'd be able to make amends for it soon enough.

He'd be able to fix their relationship.

He'd soon see his parents again. It wasn't as if this was his final farewell to them. Somewhere inside his heart, he was making light of his whole situation.

Those were the last words he ever said to his sister.

Part 3

The great sword's tip drove itself into the ground with a thud.

"Raishin! Open your eyes, Raishin!"

The automaton girl was bawling her eyes out. Clinging on to her master, her desperation was almost comical. However, the blood flowing out of him refused to stop. The light shining down on the grass revealed a black slickness.

The watching students sank into silence, holding their breath as they awaited what happened next.

Loki coldly looked down at the prone figure of Raishin, and then turned his back on him.

"... Come, Cherubim."

[Yes, Yes... Hmm...?]

Cherubim's head was tilted. Its figure seemed to be questioning Loki whether they were just going to leave without making sure of their victory.

“This situation is that idiot’s own doing. There’s no doubt that the fault isn’t mine. However, if he were to die now, I would have to forfeit my Entry. So now I’m going to let him get treated. That’s all there is to it.”

[I’m ready]

It seemed to have understood. Its parts clattered together as it began to reassemble itself, returning back to the form which was more human like.

Bringing it along, Loki departed from the battle field.

With the withdrawal of the higher ranked, a ceasefire was formed, and the medical team rushed onto the field.

Like they had suddenly remembered how, the students erupted into noise. Seeing the large volume of blood spilt, there were even some who fainted. Loki was somewhat depressed as he exited the crowd of people, and walked south along Main Street.

Walking down a deserted street, he eventually arrived at his goal: the academy gates.

After receiving permission from the sentry, he entered inside the gates. Ascending a flight of stairs, he opened the door to a waiting room to find a gentleman elegantly drinking red tea. The gentleman looked like he was in the prime of his life.

“It looks like the fight is over then.”

The voice was hard, with a hint of unhappiness. Loki’s throat grew dry.

“I received a report by telegraph. The conclusion to the battle was a little disappointing.”

“... I apologize, father.”

“Why did you not take his glove?”

Cold eyes were looking in his direction. Feeling an enormous surge of magic energy, Loki recoiled back.

“... If I had tried to take his glove, that automaton would have resisted.”

“You could have just kicked her aside. Or did you think my Cherubim would fall to a doll that had lost its controller?”

“That was a Bandoll, father. You said it yourself.”

The gentleman fell silent, staring at Loki. Loki piled on,

"If she had resisted for an extended period of time, her controller would have died. Any participant whose opponent dies is stripped of his Entry no matter the reason. Therefore..."

"... Fine, enough of that. I trust your judgment on this matter. However. . ."

Goosebumps formed on the back of Loki's neck. The gentleman's voice had become penetratingly cold.

"Why did you go and do that on your own?"

Loki had no immediate reply. Sweat started forming on his palms.

"I'm asking you why you threw away your 7th seat, and willingly dropped down to the 99th seat."

"... It was necessary for the plan, so I exercised my own judgment."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"The odds of Frey winning are next to none. I wanted to pit the Garm and Angel against each other to show the difference in their combat ability, so I had to eliminate **Second Last** first."

“That was a needless thing to do.”

“... I apologize.”

“It’s fine. You are a son whom I take much pride in. I’ll just close an eye over this trivial selfishness of yours. I’ll also deal with the military if they make a fuss over it. However- the next time, if you try to pull off a stunt like this again, I’ll have no choice but to stop your heart from beating.”

“... I understand.”

“Just as you planned it, tomorrow Rabi and Cherubim will face off. There’s no need to hold anything back. Fight like you mean to destroy it completely.”

“I understand.”

“I have high hopes for you. Go out there and show off your strength to your heart’s content. Doing so will be in Frey’s best interests as well.”

Loki’s brow twitched slightly. He wasn’t sure if the gentleman had noticed it.

“... Of course, father.”

Being dismissed, he bowed and retreated.

His back turned on the gentleman, Loki's teeth ground furiously as he walked away.

Part 4

Charl hurried towards the doctor's office, where Raishin was being taken to.

The thing Raishin was being transported on was an ingenious idea of the medical faculty: a simple bed that could be conjured up. Automatically adjusting for differences in height and passing over bumps and dents in the ground, it was designed to be able to absorb any shocks. Also, it was freely adjustable to suit the casualty's dimensions.

Inside the office, several female students from the medical team and doctor Cruel were waiting.

Cruel had a refreshing smile on his face, complimenting the team on their work. On seeing Charl's face though, he shriveled. It looked like the look on her face gave him a memory of a past experience that had been particularly painful.

Raishin was brought further into the office, into the treatment room. Other than personnel from the medical team, none were allowed in. Yaya looked like she had been dragged off Raishin forcibly; she was in a deranged state, trying to cling on to his body.

"Raishin! Raishin!"

Magic energy was leaking out from her body, activating Yaya's magic circuits by herself.

(That idiot! She'll give away the fact that she's a Bandoll!)

Charl was about to run over and stop her, but someone else reached Yaya first.

Her smooth silver hair was beautiful. Looking much like the real thing, it sparkled under the light.

Her figure, clothes, and body structure gave her a surprisingly close resemblance to Yaya.

Yaya turned towards the maiden, and exclaimed "Big sis Irori...!"

She called her sister- but that wasn't possible, since automata weren't connected by blood. Looking like two portraits of people painted by the same artist, they gave off the feel of having the same creator instead.

"Calm down, Yaya."

"But, Raishin is—! It's just like last time... He covered Yaya, and then... blood! Yaya isn't hurt, but he took the blow... because of Yaya... Raishin, Raishin!"

A small sharp sound could be heard as Yaya's cheeks turned red.

“Calm. Down.”

Her voice was cold and scary. Yaya flinched, then regained her senses.

“What good would making a fuss here do?”

Yaya’s spirit visibly sunk. Her head dropped, and she continued to sob silently.

Seeing Yaya’s state, the girl called Irori hugged Yaya, gently speaking to her.

“Believe in Raishin. Believe and wait. There’s nothing to fear. Raishin is strong. And he won’t die until he defeats Tenzen.”

Unable to hold in her emotions any further, Yaya buried her face into her sister’s chest.

In any case, it looked like Yaya had calmed down somewhat. Just as she backed off, Charl noticed that the words Irori had spoken had also given her encouragement. She didn’t know who this “Tenzen” was, but as long as he was alive, Raishin wouldn’t die. For sure.

Praying for his safety, Charl stared at the opposite wall.

She opened her eyes with a start.

Directly in front of her was Sigmund, a blanket in his mouth. It looked like he had brought it over from somewhere.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“I fell asleep? How long has it been? How’s Raishin?”

“It looks like he’s still unconscious”

Charl groggily rubbed her eyes. Since she had fallen asleep in such an unnatural position, her neck ached.

Looking around her, she noticed she was sitting on a bench in front of the doctor’s office. Light streaming in from the corridor was starting to fade, but light from inside the office was leaking out, making it relatively bright.

“In any case, even if he recovered, now would be time for him to sleep. You should rest as well.”

“Yeah...”

Wrapping herself up with the blanket, she hugged her knees atop the bench.

“What an idiot. A dazzling idiot. His idiocy is so huge it reaches the heavens. If he’d thought about it for a moment it would have been obvious. That attack was able to cut through Yaya, and there’s no way taking an attack like that on bare flesh would leave him unharmed.”

“... that’s true, however.”

Landing on top of the blanket and curling himself up like a cat, Sigmund continued

“Yaya possesses a superb and sturdy defensive strength. She said it herself. Bladed objects cannot hurt her.”

“But, he managed to cut her. It was a clean cut too.”

“Therein lies the rub. He received an attack on a scale which could cut Yaya, yet Raishin wasn’t split in two.”

“— what’s the meaning of this?”

“Killing your opponent means instant disqualification. Charlotte, do you think Loki could have held back?”

“Hold back... But back then, you saw the force of the blow too right? Cherubim was already in an advanced motion of attack. Once past that point, it’s unlikely he would be able to hold back.”

Raishin had swapped himself into Yaya’s position. He didn’t jump in to push her away. Therefore, the tip of the blade merely grazed him. Was that the reason why the wound was so shallow?

“Hypothetically, if you deactivated the magic art— no, even if you switched it off, inertia would have caused the blade to continue on. The only way to stop it would be if you used telekinesis... Ah.”

Charl finally noticed what Sigmund had been trying to say.

“That’s right. Cherubim’s magic circuit is not telekinetic in nature.”

D-works had sent Cherubim with a lot of belief in it. It was a state-of-the-art prototype. That complicated transformation mechanism it possessed was cutting edge technology. Obviously, the magic circuit installed inside it would also be state-of-the-art as well.

A magic art strong enough to cut through Yaya’s body. And yet, that magic art also allowed heavy weights to be swung about with ease. Not only was it able to allow that massive sword to float in mid-air, it also allowed the user to send short swords flying towards the opponent. Just what in the world was this circuit?

“Figuring this out might be the key to defeating the Sword Emperor.”

“You’re right. Once that idiot recovers, I’ll tell him.”

“Is that really ok?”

“Huh?”

Sigmund stared at Charl with a prudent look in his eyes.

“If he wins, Raishin will become stronger. Experience is brought forth by refining a human being much like polishing with a grindstone. Especially Raishin, who is the type that gains strength by progressing through battles.”

She understood. To the officials in charge, Raishin was just another face in the crowd. But his battle potential was astounding. If he got enough experience, he was the type to grow by leaps and bounds.

“You are the sixth seat of the Rounds— unless you plan on following Loki, who willingly dropped all the way to the bottom just to face Raishin. If he makes it all the way, by the time he faces you, his strength might have exceeded your expectations.”

“... Don’t make me repeat myself. I am Charlotte of the noble house of Belew. No matter how strong that idiot becomes, I will just obliterate him head on. And besides,”

For the first time in that night, Charl laughed.

“It’d be a shame for him to exit now that he’s managed to catch your attention as well.” “‘as well’ would imply that he’s already caught your attention too, you know?”

“Wha- I- Yo-”

“I’m sorry. Maybe that one was going a little too far. Recently whenever I look at you, your face seems to be heating up brighter than a fire.”

“Just be quiet already Sigmund! I’ll change your lunch from chicken to powdered milk!”

Sigmund smiled wryly, hiding his face behind his tail so he could pretend he didn’t hear her.

Charl pouted. Grabbing on to his wings, she tried to pull them apart with all her might.

(What's wrong... it's not like it's a big deal if I'm a little interested, is it?)

Raishin was the first friend she had made in the academy.

You better not die, Raishin.

“... because I'm worrying this much about you.”

In a voice that no one could hear, Charl softly whispered.

Blushing, she quickly grabbed the blanket, pulling it over her head.

Part 5

It was just before dawn, right at the time where the air was the chilliest.

The medical faculty was quiet and still. At the entrance, a professor in a white coat- Kimberly stepped into the building. Brushing her coat, she shook off the morning dew which had gathered.

Something deep within the corridor caught her gaze.

“God, Buddha, or whoever’s up there, please help Raishin to get better...!”

A lone girl was staring up at the moon, her hands clasped together in a prayer. Her lustrous black hair shone under the moonlight, giving her a saintly aura.

“Yaya will no longer be selfish. If Raishin becomes friendly with a human girl, Yaya won’t be jealous. If Raishin’s clothes give off the scent of another girl, or he throws Yaya to one side, or even if one day he suddenly goes “I’ve got a girlfriend now!” —“

While speaking, her tone of voice gradually faded into a dull monotone, and the light in her eyes also started to disappear.

Yaya jerked her head up suddenly, and hurriedly continued.

“That was a mistake. It was just a feint. Don’t believe that. Yaya will really not get jealous at all, so please, save Raishin, I beg you...!”

“That’s a pretty pathetic prayer.”

Yaya turned her head with a start.

“You look pretty lively. I must say you’ve caused me a great deal of surprise. Your controller is in that sort of state, yet your activity level has barely dipped at all.”

If the situation was considered, such behaviour was actually harmful. Continuous draining of magic energy from a master in a critical state was equivalent to inflicting more harm upon him.

Yaya was stunned, then quickly fell silent, hanging her head low.

A prickling sense of guilt stabbed her in the chest. She didn’t particularly hate Yaya or anything, but somehow, she couldn’t help but be cold towards excessively superior Automata.

“Well, don’t worry so much. That guy is like a cockroach, almost impossible to kill. I’m sure that wound on his chest isn’t that big of a deal.”

It was a pretty bad attempt at consoling her. Kimberly left Yaya's side and moved onwards.

Entering the doctor's office, she was assailed by the smell of blood and antiseptics.

Right in front of the entrance to the treatment room, doctor Cruel had stationed himself there.

With a grumpy look on his face, he was looking through a thick medical book.

"Well, you look pretty sour."

"Damn right I am. There's no joy in saving a man's life."

He spat out without even looking up. Although he said so, he had been up all night looking after the injured, such was his professionalism.

"So, how's **Second Last**?"

"He's one heck of a lucky devil, I'll tell you that."

He handed over Raishin's medical charts. Wiping his spectacles, Cruel explained.

“If it had been a few millimeters deeper, it would have pierced his lungs. One centimeter and his heart would have been gouged out.”

“Wow.”

“The angle of the cut was fortuitous as well. His collarbone’s broken, but he escaped with only two broken ribs, and his internal organs are all fine. Plus, for a wound received from such a big sword, the cut was relatively clean. Because of that stitching him up was easy- he really does have the luck of the gods. Someone up there must be looking out for him... is the kind of feeling you get from looking at his chart.”

“Then, his life is not in danger?”

“For now, at least.”

His words were carefully chosen. Cruel had a proper doctor look on his face for once as he spoke.

“He did lose quite a lot of blood. Because of that his blood pressure is dangerously low. We also cannot rule out the possibility that there might be negative after effects. The worst thing that could happen now would be sepsis. Automata contain numerous bacteria after all. If you’re cut by one like that, only God knows when you’ll ever wake again. Besides—”

Lowering his voice, he continued in a whisper.

“His vitality is also currently being drained away as well.”

The image of Yaya in the hallway suddenly surfaced in Kimberly’s mind. From what she saw earlier, Yaya didn’t seem to be aware that she was stealing Raishin’s life force. If she were to learn about it, she’d probably be even more upset than she was.

“By the way, it wouldn’t be weird if he were to die at any moment. Not at all.”

Kimberly scowled at the treatment room, thinking to herself.

(I don’t think he’s going to die so easily just like that, but...)

Even if he wasn’t at death’s door, effectively he was almost as good as dead. That much Kimberly knew very well.

“Even if he survives, he won’t be in any condition to battle anytime soon. Damn, I always get the worse patients. Male patients are always smelly and dirty. There’s no fun in changing a guy, or applying bandages to their wounds, or conducting physicals on them.”

“I see. So you’re saying that normally, you have fun doing those sort of things?”

“Of cou— It was just a joke!”

Seeing Kimberly reach for a pair of scissors and stare at that place, he hurriedly changed his tune.

After that he began to grumble, unable to suppress the thoughts lurking at the bottom of his heart.

“Really now, what the hell is wrong with him! Damn jinx! I managed to fix him up and chase him away, and no sooner is he out than he’s brought right back in. And that erotically cute automata of his! What’s with that “touch me and I’ll crush you” attitude? Ah, dammit, stupid **Second Last**! I wish you’d just explode!”

Cruel continued to curse. Kimberly felt that entertaining him would be idiotic, and so she looked outside the window instead.

The sky was already becoming white. The day was breaking.

“Now then... let’s see whether you can recover before the Night Party ends.”

She directed the question at Raishin.

However the treatment room was harshly silent, without a single sound in response.

Part 6

Raishin didn't recover consciousness, but time marched on nonetheless, and it was now the second night.

As things stood, it was currently a Monday. Even though the Night Party had already begun, only a handful of students were actually involved in it. Hence lessons and classes continued to be held.

After those classes were over, it was after school time. Around six in the evening, with the sun sinking, the students once again started gathering around the field of battle.

Other than casual observers, there were those who were there to gather research. While the crowd was not as huge as the day before, it was still large enough that the mobile stall opened for business.

Amongst the hustle and bustle, Charl was also present.

She had no intention of being there to search for Loki's weak point so that after Raishin recovered, she could give it to him. Obviously, she had another reason. A completely unrelated and different reason. It wasn't like she was trying to help Raishin. Not at all.

Since she didn't eat anything at all last night, the smell of food made her stomach rumble. Hesitating in front of the mobile stall, she eventually surrendered to the smell, and bought some doughnuts. Sharing some with Sigmund, she waited for the battle to begin.

Tonight, **Silent Roar**— Frey would make her appearance.

Shortly, Loki appeared on the field with Cherubim following closely behind him. He had his hands thrust into his pockets, waiting for Frey to show up.

The crowd of students began to whisper amongst themselves.

"Look. His highness the Sword Emperor is full of confidence."

"He has every right to be. Even if those who numbered 50 and below were to team up, they still wouldn't be a match for the Sword Emperor. You saw what happened yesterday to **Second Last**. That was like a sneak preview of the fights to come."

"In that case, **Silent Roar** might not even turn up. Their difference in power is too great."

"In the first place, why would he want to throw away his own position and drop down all the way to such a low level? Once you change your seat, you can't reclaim your original seat, right?"

“No idea. But I heard he was interested in **Second Last** or something.”

“Shh. **Silent Roar** is making her way out now.”

The voices died down. All attention was now turned onto one spot, and Charl too, turned to look.

Her pearl hair fluttering, a weak looking female student was making her way to the field. Behind her, a dog automaton with wolf like fur followed.

It was Frey. Even though she was Charl’s senior by one year, it didn’t feel like it. On the contrary, Charl felt like she was giving support to a junior by watching over her as she entered into the field.

There wasn’t any signal given to indicate the match had begun. Once you entered the field battle commenced immediately. However, Loki didn’t make any attempt to attack.

Instead, he stared intensely at Frey, before sighing languidly.

“Quite frankly, this is a surprise.”

It was a voice barely above a whisper. Frey was surprised, but Loki continued on nonetheless.

“I thought you wouldn’t show up, that you’d run away from this battle.”

“... I’m not doing that.”

“That’s what I’m surprised about. It isn’t like you. Ever since we were kids, you were always slow at doing things, clumsy, and quick to give up. Easily frightened by everything, you’d always hide behind my back. Surely you, who are like that, can’t be serious about facing me?”

“... Loki, ever since we were children, you always were able to do anything.”

Casting her eyes onto the floor, Frey softly muttered.

“Always able to do things promptly... Smart... Strong... Not clumsy at all. I liked being able to hide behind your back.”

She bit her lip in silence. After a moment, she lifted her head up.

“But, then is then, and now is now. Even I am a student at this academy... Someone who aims for the Wiseman’s throne, and a puppeteer.”

Stiffly raising her gaze, she stared straight at Loki.

Loki looked shocked. Charl was also surprised by Frey's declaration. The weak air that she always gave off had disappeared, replaced by a fierce determination, as well as a dignified air.

"Loki... I don't know if you hate me, but..."

Frey's ample chest— Charl felt her inferiority complex acting up— heaved as she declared,

"I will fight. If I keep hiding behind Loki's back, I will never be able to protect anything."

"Protect? What are you—"

"Rabi!"

"Woof!"

A bluish white light shone. A line of magic energy extended, connecting Rabi and Frey.

The match had begun. Against everyone's expectations, the one who made the first move was Frey.

Rabi's howl caused sonic waves to form, creating a "bullet" that he shot out. It acted like a drill, plowing through the lawn, causing chunks of earth to be dislodged as it sped forward.

Loki was rooted to the ground. However, Cherubim reacted, covering its master.

With a swing of its blade, it dissipated the mysterious bullet. In that moment, it was very slight, but there was a surge of magic energy from Loki. Even Charl could only feel it ever so slightly; the rest of the students were completely unaware that Loki had used a magic art.

"Weak."

Several short swords emerged from Cherubim's back, and were fired out in rapid succession.

"Rabi!"

Rabi dodged the incoming swords with surprising agility. However, the short swords seemed to have a will of their own, changing their trajectory to target Rabi after he had dodged, tenaciously chasing after him.

One of the swords managed to graze Rabi's leg.

It wasn't a shallow cut either. Blood was flowing, and Rabi's movements had slowed.

Frey wasn't flustered. Calmly, she focused her magic energy.

"Rabi! One more time!"

Rabi released another bullet. Sucking the short swords into the vortex, it flew towards Cherubim.

And just like earlier, Cherubim swung its blade, and the bullet dissipated once again.

"I told you it was weak."

Loki sent his magic energy over, and the short swords began to dance in the air again.

There was no dodging this time. Slicing Rabi in various areas, he let out a high whine of pain.

"Rabi!"

Frey ran over, hugging him in support. Soon, the shadow of Loki loomed over her.

There was a sneer of derision on his face, but there was no triumph in it.

With cold eyes, Loki stared down at Frey.

“It ends now. I suggest you close your eyes.”

Cherubim hefted its blade. Swinging that heavy blade down, it looked like it was aiming to cleave Rabi neatly in two— but at that moment, something abnormal happened.

Magic energy strong enough to repel the blade and send it flying backwards burst out from Frey’s whole body.

Such density! I can actually see a black mist in the air!

Charl's eyes were wide open in shock. Sigmund had spread his wings, exposing his wariness.

(What magic energy...! How could any human being be able to release this much...!?)

Loki and Cherubim jumped back, increasing the distance between them.

In that moment though, Rabi's figure had abruptly changed.

His shoulders were raised, and his claws were bared. His fur was standing on the end, like a hedgehog's quills. His body also increased in size, rather than a dog it was now closer to an alpha wolf. The biggest change of all though, was reserved for his face. His bared fangs made him look like a beast straight out of hell. If the mythological Cerberus existed, his face would be the spitting image of Rabi's.

"Rabi... Rabi...?!"

Frey was shocked by the sudden and massive outburst of magic energy.

(Her state has changed. Is this really... Frey's magic art?)

Rabi howled loudly.

His roar caused the atmosphere around him to tremble, and massive amounts of magic energy began to flow into him till the point of hurting his skin, like an electric shock.

“Uu... Huh...?”

Frey sank to her knees. Releasing that much magic energy meant that an equivalent toll was inflicted onto her body. Frey’s skin began to tear in places, and blood started seeping out.

“Ah... Ahh.... Ahhh!?”

She started to scream in pain. The sudden burst of blood covering her made her look like a daruma; beside her Rabi was gnashing his teeth and howling menacingly at Cherubim.

No one could have foreseen such a turn of events, but then, Rabi began his fierce onslaught.

Chapter 6 – The Fool’s Choice

Part 1

The beast unleashed a howl. In that instant, magic energy was gathered, and a mortar-like attack was unleashed.

Loki and Cherubim jumped to evade, and the bullets raining down scattered amongst the battle field, some crashing into the stone pillars which marked the boundary of the field. Fragments of stone were dislodged by the impact, one cutting Charl on her face.

(Just what is that..!?)

Charl’s eyes were rooted to the ongoing battle. Rabi was pushing forwardly relentlessly, the fight turning one-sidedly in his favour. A charge forward, followed up by a cannon blast. Against Rabi’s rapid barrage, Cherubim could do nothing but side step each shot.

Because Rabi was using up a lot of energy, Frey’s skin continued to tear and she continued to bleed.

By this time Frey could no longer walk. She was crouched on the field, writhing in agony.

Hovering over Charl’s head, Sigmund whispered in a low voice.

“This isn’t good. Frey’s magic energy is being forcibly drawn out of her.”

“Forcibly... what will happen?”

“If this continues, that girl will die!”

Rabi was still raging about, attacking Cherubim furiously. Suddenly though, his ankles were slashed by short swords.

Cherubim’s short swords had extended out in all directions, and unable to withstand them, Rabi was forced to retreat.

The eight short swords were floating in mid-air; with Loki in the heart of it, they were slowly rotating around him.

“That’s the ‘Barrier of Swords’ ...!”

That was the reason why Loki was considered a direct rival to the Magnus. It was a barrier that automatically attacked any intruder that came within its zone of control.

The moment Rabi put a foot forward, the blades moved sharply, mercilessly slicing it.

The blades pierced through, penetrating the leg and causing bits of flesh to fly out. However-

Near the site of the wound, bubbles of foam were forming, healing Rabi's injury.

What amazing regenerative ability! Nonetheless, that regeneration looked to come at a cost. Absorbing the wound in place of Rabi, more blood spilled out of Frey's body, evaporating and changing into the black mist.

(Her blood is being converted into magic energy...!)

Fresh blood was excellent material for magic arts, due to its high purity. It was akin to burning with gasoline. Whether it was due to a special mechanism, or some magic art, her blood was forcibly being converted.

It went without saying of course, that there was a fatal limit to how much blood could be converted. At the rate things were going, Frey was sure to die!

"Cherubim, halt!"

[Yes...?]

Having received Loki's command, Cherubim ceased its attack.

This was an opening for Rabi to escape, but escape was the last thing on the current Rabi's mind.

Charging forward like a bullet, he fiercely head butted Cherubim, sending it flying. Rolling with the momentum, he flew onto Loki, mounting the youth.

Baring his fangs, Rabi tried to crush Loki's windpipe. Loki had both hands wrapped around Rabi's neck, pushing him back. However, Loki's strength was only human. His hands couldn't hold the dog back for long!

"Uu... Rabi... Don't...!"

Her blood flowing, Frey cried out. However, Rabi didn't, or couldn't hear her words. Unable to keep still, Charl started moving towards Frey.

"Wait, Charl. What do you plan on doing?"

Sigmund dug his claws into her beret. Charl's reply was laced with irritation,

"No matter how you look at it that's not normal! *Noblesse Oblige* requires me to save a life if I—"

"You can't!"

It wasn't just Sigmund. Another different voice restrained Charl.

“Know your place, Charlotte.”

Turning her head around, Kimberly was standing behind her.

“The only ones allowed onto the stage of the Night Party are those who have been summoned. Your turn is still a long ways off... To go up on stage even though you haven’t been called is considered ill-mannered.”

“But, Professor! This isn’t the time or place to be saying that!”

“Don’t worry, just relax. There’s someone else more qualified than you to help that’s here after all.”

Kimberly grinned. She was staring past Charl, her gaze on something on the field.

With a bad feeling in her heart, Charl turned to look.

That’s right. Tonight, there was only one more person who could be on the stage of the Night Party.

Sliding past the motionless Cherubim, something was running.

That something kicked Rabi off, releasing Loki.

Using the momentum to bounce off, it jumped backward. The mysterious shadow split into two, and each both landed.

One of them was a top-class automaton with beautiful black hair. And, the identity of the other-

“... That. Foolish. Idiot!”

Steam was rising from Charl’s head.

That idiot had a grin on his face, and spoke with a carefree attitude.

“Allow me to join in. After all, I don’t have a partner for this dance.”

Standing right in the middle of the battlefield was the person who was supposed to be heavily injured, none other than **Second Last**.

Part 2

The throbbing of the wound gave off a burning sensation like his chest was on fire.

Even though the pain was stabbing him in the chest, Raishin still wore a smile.

Even he himself found it strange that he was smiling. No matter how much he smiled, it didn't change the reality that he could do next to nothing. If he lost focus for a moment, his knees would start to give away. The thread holding his chest together was taut, like it was about to break at any moment. On top of that, he couldn't use his dominant arm.

Even so, he had to do it.

Rabi's physique was like a bear, and he was growling in a low tone. Raishin stepped forward in front of him, "Let's do it, Yaya. Suimei Nijuu-?!"

Suddenly, something rammed into him from his side. Being weak, he was unable to withstand it, and fell over dramatically.

Having made such a cool entrance, this turn of events was embarrassing. Raishin hurriedly got to his feet, and turned to face the culprit-Loki who had bowled him over.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

“That’s what I should be saying. Unrelated people like you shouldn’t butt in. Cherubim!”

[I’m ready]

At Loki’s command, Cherubim started floating in mid-air. Before the steel automaton could do anything though, Raishin had smacked the back of Loki’s head, causing interference in its actions.

“What are you doing?!”

“That’s my line! Just what are you going to do?!”

“You imbecile! Obviously I’m going to stop Rabi!”

You’re the idiot! If you attack, then it’ll put Frey’s life in further danger!”

“You know nothing! An imbecile like you should just shut up and watch me!”

“You should be watching me!” “No, you!” “You!”

Once again the two of them begun to quarrel like children. This wasn’t the time or place to be acting like this, but the two of them just couldn’t get along at all. While they were arguing, Rabi charged towards them... but Yaya and Cherubim combined beautifully to block Rabi.

“So, you plan on getting in my way no matter what?”

Loki spoke with clear killing intent. Raishin looked him straight in the eye, “Of course. That’s because you plan on killing Rabi.”

“... If I don’t, some of the spectators will get injured. Frey too, will die as well.”

“If that’s how you feel, then you should just step aside. Let me stop him instead.”

In the next instant, Loki’s leg drew an arc in the air.

The kick landed right on Raishin’s waist. The pain shot up to his collarbone, causing Raishin to writhe in agony.

“Look. What can you hope to accomplish in your current state? There’s only person who can rescue Frey, and that person is me.”

He turned his palm out towards Cherubim. The automaton began to transform.

Sounding very much like a storm howling as it changed, Cherubim assumed its giant sword form.

“One clean strike to the Heart will destroy it, and that monster will be stopped. Then Frey will be sav—”

“That’s not saving her at all!”

Raishin’s voice struck like a slap to the face.

“Don’t you get it?! She dotes on Rabi that much... he’s practically family to her! If you kill Rabi and save her only, that isn’t considered rescuing her at all!”

“— Then what would you have me do!? Stand by and watch Frey die?!”

“No!”

While shouting out, at the same time he placed his hand on Yaya’s back, directly channeling magic energy into her.

“I’m going to save both. Suimei Nijuuyonshou!”

“Roger!”

Crouched low, Yaya sped off with a burst, like a gust of wind.

Perhaps it was due to some feral intuition, but Rabi acted like he had sensed some danger. Stepping left and right, he dodged the oncoming Yaya. However, Yaya adjusted her body, chasing after him.

It looked like two birds playing a game of tag. The speed of the contest caused the viewing gallery to stir.

“I’m counting on you Yaya. Hold him off!”

Yaya was keeping Rabi occupied, diverting his attention away. Using this opportunity, Raishin dashed forward. Reaching the writhing Frey, he picked her up.

Other than killing Rabi, there was only one other way to stop him.

Instead of inflicting injury onto Rabi, he would render Frey unconscious instead.

An unconscious puppeteer was unable to release even the slightest of magic energy. It was the same reasoning behind why animals did not possess magic energy. The combination of a lowered level of consciousness and low intelligence meant that a human would not be able to generate magic energy at all.

Frey’s eyes were vacant and unfocused. Raishin swallowed, hesitating for a brief moment. It wasn’t his first time doing it, but since his opponent was a girl, he could feel his resolve weaken.

However, there was no other way.

If he was going to be the sort of person who left things half-assed now, then he would never be able to protect anyone.

Placing his arm around Frey's neck, he began to wrap his arm tightly on top of her scarf.

Suddenly, Rabi changed direction, and charged over towards Raishin's position.

Raishin reacted at once, pushing Frey away while evading himself. Unable to keep himself upright, Raishin tumbled down, and the shadow of Rabi hung over him.

His sharp fangs were going for his throat. Yaya, she... couldn't make it in time!

"Raishin!"

He heard Yaya's desperate cry, and then—

The clang of something hard clashing resonated in his ears.

It wasn't the sound of teeth meeting each other, but the sound of a giant sword intercepting fangs.

Like he was protecting Raishin, someone's back was in front of him. That someone was Loki, and the thing that stopped Rabi was the giant sword in his hands.

"Loki..."

"If I may say so myself, I am a tolerant person... but now I find myself wanting to kill people who are only talk!"

While competing with Rabi in a contest of strength, Loki spat out his next words.

"Once I'm done with him, you're next!"

Raishin chuckled grimly, and leapt to his feet, responding, "Bring it on. I'll be happy to kick your ass!"

"Speak for yourself!"

The two of them moved at the same time.

Loki swung the giant blade, sending the huge body of Rabi flying. Immediately he reverted Cherubim to its original state, sending it after Rabi in a pursuit.

However, it made no slashing attempts. It merely displayed all its blades. Forcing Rabi backwards, Rabi soon encountered Yaya, who was on standby. Stuck between the two automata, Rabi couldn't move.

By the time that happened, Raishin was already next to Frey. Just like he did earlier, he squeezed her neck, constricting her carotid artery.

Almost instantly, with the blood flow to her brain shut off, Frey's limbs splayed outwards and went limp.

Rabi began to stagger about in pain.

Scratching at the ground with his front paws, he began to shake his head. His feet looked unsteady, and his tail drooped, no energy in it.

His muscles which had swelled up now began to shrivel before everyone's eyes.

And then, he collapsed with a thud. It all happened so quickly it was underwhelming.

Just as everyone thought it was over, it happened.

Rabi's shoulder burst open, scattering blood and flesh everywhere.

Part 3

Ten minutes had barely passed after the inconclusive end to the battle.

At the entrance to the medical faculty, someone was restlessly pacing back and forth.

It was Raishin. Unable to keep calm, he was waiting for someone. Yaya watched him worriedly. She was still worried about her master's wounds.

Finally, Raishin's feet stopped moving. His sharp sense of hearing had picked up the sound of footsteps.

His eyes confirmed what his ears had heard. The outdoor light shining down slowly revealed the identities of the approaching shadows. There was no way he could mistake that beguiling kimono. It was Shouko and Irori.

Raishin burst out of the entrance to receive the both of them.

"Sorry. And thanks. I... other than Shouko, there isn't anyone else I can rely on..."

"Save your story for later. Where is the broken puppet?"

Breaking out into a half run, Raishin led Shouko into the doctor's office.

Opening the door, four figures came into sight.

There was a bespectacled doctor. Kimberly, who was leaning against a wall. And two girls from the medical team. On the far end of the room, Frey was receiving treatment, sleeping on a simple bed.

The first person to react was Dr. Cruel.

“A goddess...!?”

After blurting that out, he hurriedly tried to smooth his appearance, and put on a refreshing smile on his face. While continuing to work on Frey, he spoke.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. What brings a fine lady like you to a squalid place like this? Unfortunately, as you can see I am a little busy at the moment, so perhaps if you could wait—”

“Yes, pleased to meet you too, ill-mannered boy.”

“Boy!?”

“If you really want to charm me, I suggest you first learn proper etiquette befitting of a human being, then try again.”

Walking past Cruel like he wasn't there, Shouko strode towards the centre of the office.

Rabi had been laid out on a table.

Since Rabi was an automaton, normally he wouldn't fall under the jurisdiction of the doctor's office. However, since he was largely organic, he wasn't brought to the technological or engineering departments, but here instead. Also, he was brought here so he could be next to his puppeteer, Frey.

Shouko shot a sideways glance at Kimberly, who was next to her.

"Is it alright for me to be here uninvited?"

"I don't care. In fact I'm thrilled. I might get to see the famous Karyuusai in action."

Having gained consent, Shouko fiddled with her eye patch, selecting a lens to examine Rabi with.

Somehow or another, she seemed to be looking through Rabi's body with an x-ray filter. You could see and hear the magic energy flowing through her eye patch.

Without lifting her head, Shouko began yelling out instructions in a sharp voice.

“I’ll need insulation forceps, a conduction catheter, and ethanol in distilled water. Afterwards, I’ll need a lot of salt. Irori, get me a washbasin full of ice. Also, Professor Kimberly, can I trouble you to cut out a lock of hair from the child sleeping over there?”

While speaking, she reached into her sleeve and pulled out a parcel. Opening it, there were various tools of different sizes crammed inside. Additionally, several precious stones tumbled out onto the table with a clatter, at which Raishin could only stare at with envious eyes.

“Jewels...?”

“You really know nothing. Those are magic stones. They are natural batteries for storing magic energy. Because of the composition of their crystalline structure, they are able to store high quality magic energy inside them.”

While cutting Frey’s hair, Kimberly whispered into Raishin’s ear.

Shouko’s hands were a flurry of movement. Removing the chain wrapped around her waist, she laid it down, enclosing Rabi within.

It was a barrier. It looked similar to a technique the Akabane clan had.

Next, Shouko held a cord in her mouth, using it to tie up the rolled-up sleeves of her kimono.

Her arms were slender and white. Her fingers were long and slender as well, and they were a little bony for a lady. Looking like they had been used regularly, they were the fingers of a master craftsman.

Finally, Shouko's "operation" began.

The way she used her hands were polished and refined, with no wasted movements. If anything, she didn't appear at a loss at all. It was as if she knew what to do and exactly when to do it.

It was like watching a pianist on her instrument. With no time for the gallery to catch their breath, in less than ten minutes she had finished Rabi's treatment.

She used Frey's hair for the stiches. After swiftly suturing his wound, "Bandage him."

She gave instructions to the two girls from the medical team, then stepped away from Rabi.

Washing her hands in the basin Irori held out, she cleaned the blood off.

"Well done."

Only admiration was in Kimberly's voice as she thanked Shouko for her work.

“So, will that automaton be able to live longer?”

“In the first place, it was always going to be impossible.”

“— that’s, how do I say it, quite an unexpected answer.”

“The internal organs are a total mess. If the Heart is anything like that, it’s pretty much a hopeless case.”

Raishin unconsciously looked over at Frey, and was a little relieved she was still unconscious and didn’t hear that.

“However, my rule is to do everything flawlessly, and do it till the end. I would like to repair the parts that were damaged, so that he would have a stronger connection to life. If only I had some quality oaken timber with me.”

“Oak? Are you planning on woodcarving as well?”

“I am a puppeteer. Rather than this pretense of being a doctor, you could say the image of an artisan of wood suits me better.”

“Fine, fine, I got it. Well, I’m in a hurry, so guess I better get going first.”

Kimberly walked out of the doctor’s office. After seeing her disappear from sight, Shouko turned to face Raishin.

“Well then, let’s hear your story.”

Part 4

Shouko walked down the hallway with an unnatural step that Raishin had become familiar with.

Behind her, Yaya and Raishin were following her like two problem children who had been summoned to see the principal.

Finally, Shouko stopped at the deserted balcony. Irori took out and opened a small box, retrieving some tobacco from inside.

Shouko packed her pipe and lit it. She breathed in, exhaled, and tapped her pipe to clear some ash.

After finishing her sole task, Shouko was now relaxing. However, the silence was frightening. Raishin had failed to complete the mission the military had given him, and almost caused Yaya to suffer severe damage. His negligence had also caused him to be heavily injured. On top of that, because of his desire to save Rabi at any cost, he had done something that he knew would draw the attention of the academy; he had summoned Shouko over. Suffice to say there was no lack of material with which he could be reproved for.

Unable to bear the silence any further, Raishin decided to speak first.

“Well... Thanks for helping. I am in your debt...”

“I haven’t helped anyone yet. However, I’ll still hold you in my debt.”

While packing fresh tobacco into her pipe, she spoke without a tinge of anger in her voice.

And then, she gently rolled a small stone about in her palm for them to see.

The small stone had a pattern engraved onto it. Upon seeing that, Raishin and Yaya's eyes opened wide.

"A magic circuit! Don't tell me, this is Rabi's...!?"

"With this, the military's goal is achieved. Now there should be no complaints even if I let him live.

Let him live. Once the meaning of those words sank in, Raishin suddenly felt the tension drain away, leaving him exhausted.

"Th... thank you... Thank you so much, Shouko...!"

"It's still too early for words of gratitude. There's only a small chance that what I did would help."

Even though she said that, Shouko had done all she could. That alone made him feel all choked up.

Now that he was exhausted, the pain he had forgotten came back in full force. In the first place, Raishin's body wasn't in any condition to be walking around. Involuntarily, he found himself collapsing onto his knees there and then.

"This is most displeasing to me."

Shouko's words caught him by surprise, and Raishin looked up. However, it seemed like she wasn't talking about Raishin's situation. Shouko was gazing far off into the distance.

"Boy, you already realized it too right? D-Works participated in the Night Party as a means to compare the Angel and Garm type against each other."

"... Yeah. Yomi said the same thing."

"However, that's just deception. It's a lie used to conceal the fact that they are using those two."

Those two. Was she talking about Frey and Loki?

"D-Works' goal isn't to compare the performance between the two models. While Loki looks to be really aiming for the seat of the Wiseman— Frey is being used for testing."

That last part threw Raishin off. He didn't understand what Shouko was saying.

To be more precise though, he was starting to understand. All the countless facts and numerous events were screaming the truth at him. Rabi's rampage. The pain assaulting Frey. That immense bleeding...

"... Just now, during that fight. Why did Rabi suddenly go berserk?"

"You've got it the wrong way around, boy. The one who went out of control was Frey."

"Huh...?"

"Rabi was overloaded with magic energy beyond the normal level, which is what caused him to lose his sense of reason. Unable to handle the strain, his Heart finally ruptured from the stress."

"... I don't get it. What are you talking about?"

"You really don't understand?"

Raishin faltered in the face of Shouko's sharp glare.

"Frey's heart has been implanted with a magic circuit."

"Wha—"

Next to Raishin, Yaya's mouth opened in shock.

Rabi's Heart?

No, that wasn't it. There was no mistaking his ears. Shouko had clearly said Frey's heart!

"If you want to forcibly pull out magic energy from the host, then you need to use a magic circuit. If you keep enhancing the host's affinity with magic energy, sooner or later the composition of the host's body itself will be altered."

Finally, he understood the implications of her words.

He had seen it with his own eyes earlier, hadn't he? Inside that facility which was an orphanage only in name. What he had seen inside was vile and repulsive.

"Shiramiko— in this country they're called the Promised Children. Children who are born filled with abundant magic energy in them. Don't you think it would be a wonderful idea if you could mass produce something like that?"

It was a crazy thought. It wasn't something that someone would normally think of.

However, if it were a corporation, or if it were from an army's point of view, then perhaps it wasn't so... unthinkable after all.

If you could mass produce powerful soldiers like that, it would be a matter worth celebrating.

“So, in other words, Frey and Loki are...”

“Man-made Shiramiko. Guinea pigs of D-works.”

The truth hit Raishin like a blow to the gut.

Yaya turned a ghastly shade of pale. Even Irori grimaced slightly.

Shouko continued on in a matter-of-fact voice.

“If you looked at the circulation of magic energy within those two you’d have realized it. Not only is it artificially precise, there’s an unnatural flow of magic energy within. There’s no doubt about it, their hearts have been mechanized.”

“So, you’re saying they implanted a machine into a human...?”

“The change in body color is probably a side-effect of the process. The increased burden on the body causes destruction of the body’s pigmentation.”

“And this... this is something that’s easily done?”

“Don’t be absurd. You should have already seen it, boy. What happens to those children whose operations have failed.”

The underground icehouse had contained the bodies of numerous children.

Most likely, those bodies had then been used as materials for the Garm circuit.

“There’s no wastage at all. Honestly speaking, it’s so efficient it’s unpleasant.”

A jet-black anger began to swell up, filling up Raishin’s chest completely.

What the hell was this?

What the hell was this?!

Raishin shot to his feet like a bullet, ready to sprint off at a moment’s notice.

“Wait.”

There was no room for argument in her sharp voice. Her imperative tone caused Raishin to halt in his tracks, stopping him from moving any further.

Shouko spoke calmly and slowly, but there was no doubt that her words were strict.

“You need to rest tonight. For the moment, I forbid you from leaving the academy grounds.”

“Why!?”

“You’re questioning me, boy?”

Her eyes were cold. It was as fearsome as staring down the barrel of a loaded gun. Yaya shrank back like a frightened rabbit.

“Why I assigned Komurasaki to go with you to D-Work’s orphanage- why I ordered Yaya to stay behind, do you still not understand the logic behind these?”

“... I’ll bite. Why?”

“It was to prevent you from doing something foolish.”

“The only one guilty of folly are those people! How long are you going to let them get away with doing as they please!?”

“Stop speaking so conceitedly. You’re still unable to do anything, boy. Shall I be frank with you? You are no match for him at all.”

“Him...?”

“Bronson. Once, he was also one who aspired for the Wiseman’s seat.”

He had heard that name before. That time when Charl had come to give him information.

“This was five Night Party’s back, so it would be about twenty years ago. He was defeated somewhere along the road to the Wiseman’s seat, and so left the Night Party.”

“And after that, he founded D-Works... right?”

“The way you are right now, all bristled up like that, you’ll never stand a chance against him. You wouldn’t even be able to fight the Sword Emperor now. Not to mention boy, you are heavily injured. Don’t be careless. Have you forgotten our wager?”

Unable to respond, Raishin hung his head downwards, clenching his fists.

“If you understand, then I suggest you exercise prudence.”

Shouko extinguished her pipe, and coldly turning her back on him, walked away from the balcony.

Part 5

Raishin wandered around the medical faculty with unsteady steps. Yaya followed after him reservedly, but Raishin just ignored her, and somewhere along the way she disappeared from his sight.

This went on for quite a while. By the time he noticed his surroundings, he was standing in front of the doctor's office.

The office was deserted. Perhaps it was due to the all-nighter he had pulled the previous night, but Cruel was lying on the sofa in a deep sleep. The female students from the medical team had already left, and Kimberly was nowhere to be found either.

Seeing an empty bed gave him a shock.

Frey was supposed to be sleeping on it, but she wasn't there now. Hurriedly dashing inside, on the opposite side of the door to the treatment room a pearl colored tail- Frey's hair came into view.

Her white skin was covered up with bandages in various places. Several band-aids had been plastered onto her as well.

Frey was staring intently at Rabi's bed. The bridge of his nose was wrinkled slightly, his whiskers occasionally twitching as he lay exhausted on it.

"Are you sure it's ok for you to be up so soon?"

She whipped her head back in surprise. Her frightened eyes were horribly bloodshot.

“Uu... I could say the same for you.”

“In the words of Professor Kimberly, I’m more cockroach than human.”

It was meant as a joke, but Frey didn’t laugh.

She looked totally haggard. Not knowing what was the best thing to do, Raishin spoke.

“Shouko is the world’s greatest puppet maker. So, she, I mean...”

She’ll definitely save him— he wanted to say something along those lines, but he couldn’t just irresponsibly assume that it would be so.

The life and death of any living creature was something that, no matter how much humans devoted their energy to, or how many techniques or arts they developed, they had no control over. Two years ago, Raishin had learned the truth of this statement.

Therefore. . .

“... It would be great if she could help, you know?”

Was all he could say. Frey silently nodded in agreement.

“Once he gets better, you should let Charl touch him. That girl seems to like dogs somewhat.”

“The T-Rex...?”

“She’s called that, but she really isn’t that bad of a person. She’s just a little dishonest with herself sometimes. She just has no friends because of various misunderstandings she keeps getting into.”

“... So she’s like me.”

Gently caressing the back of Rabi’s neck, Frey quietly murmured.

“But, I wasn’t lonely... Because Rabi was my family.”

“... Was Yomi your family as well?”

“Yomi... she was like my second mother.”

“... Sorry. I—”

“No... It’s because I was weak...!”



Tightly closing her eyelids, transparent tears flowed down her face.

“The truth is, I... I was supposed to be on stage then... But I, I was scared... I cried... so I stepped down... and because of that, my mother, she...”

Frey had suddenly become agitated.

He didn't know whether he should say something to her. Regardless, Frey pressed on, “That's why, Loki... hates me. Because I'm weak... and useless, I bring misfortune to others... cause death, and can't protect anyone... If I was a little more... capable, then Loki... wouldn't have to become the controller... of Cherubim...”

Sobbing heavily while talking, it was hard for Raishin to make sense of what she was saying. Furthermore, he didn't really understand most of it. However, the words that followed were like a sharp knife, cutting deep into Raishin's chest.

“Sorry Rabi... I'm so sorry... I couldn't... protect everyone...”

I couldn't protect everyone. The meaning of those words was abundantly clear to Raishin.

He knew the reason why Frey was participating in the Night Party. If development of the Garm circuit was frozen, then those dogs in the shed—Frey's family, would be disposed of.

“Because of my weakness... everyone... is dead.... I’m sorry... mother... I’m sorry... everyone... I’m sorry... Rabi...!”

It was more than Raishin could bear. Frey was clinging onto Rabi, choked with tears.

Her words, tears, and their implications rooted Raishin to the spot.

D-Works. Bronson.

Frey being a guinea pig. The children who, after they had perished, were then converted into “parts”.

Taking hostages to spur Frey into action, forcing her to take part in the Night Party against her will.

Frey wasn’t the one responsible for causing Rabi to be at death’s door, neither was she responsible for her near fatal wounds.

But even so—

Frey was the one crying now. The one bearing responsibility, the one who bore the guilt, the one who was miserable and sad.

He wanted to hug her, but his motionless right arm told him he wouldn't be able to.

So then, he shouted like he was giving an order instead.

"You're wrong!"

Surprised, Frey turned back to look at him.

"... You haven't done anything wrong. Nothing. Not a damn thing."

Raishin turned his face away, and like he was trying to escape from something, exited out of the doctor's office.

Part 6

The anger was still smoldering in his heart as Raishin left the office.

Standing in the hallway, with a face that looked like she'd just about understood everything, was Yaya.

Their eyes met for a brief moment.

"... Yaya."

"Yes?"

"I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

The smile on Yaya's face was like a flower blooming.

"Yes."

With that alone, he understood.

Raishin walked towards the entrance. Behind him, Yaya followed dutifully.

Walking out of the entrance, they were met by a shadow standing in the midst of the moonlight.

“Really, this year’s Night Party has been a total wreck.”

The shadow muttered in a flesh-and-blood voice. It had a slim body. Under the dim moonlight, its golden hair shone mysteriously. There were four horns on top of the face- or rather, 4 wings.

“The first day the 99th seat was forced to retire. And today the 98th seat was forced to stop by doctor’s intervention. Two days in a row where there hasn’t been a clean finish nor a decisive victory.”

Charl narrowed her sharp eyes into a searching glare at Raishin.

“And just where are you planning on going at this late hour?”

“... Just taking a walk.”

“You’re going to the orphanage run by D-Works aren’t you? Before Rabi’s siblings can be disposed of, you’re going to kidnap them right?”

“... You know, a lady like yourself shouldn’t be eavesdropping like that, right?”

“Idiot. Such an idiot. You’re the biggest idiot in history, the apex of the pyramid of idiocy.”

Charl was pressing her fingers against her temples, like she was having a migraine.

“Do you have any idea what kind of state you’re in? Even that quack doctor said you’re in no condition to be walking around. Only the idiot of idiots would even consider participating in the Night Party in that state. You could die at any moment, but you still want to do something so excessive? Do you have a death wish?”

Raishin listened to her verbal torrent in silence, and the corner of Charl’s eyes edged upwards.

“Be reasonable. You’ve seen it in the last battle, haven’t you? Those people have no qualms about pulling off a stunt like that with Frey. They would kill a human in cold blood. Think of what they would do to an intruder.”

“Based on their muskets, I’d say Swiss cheese.”

“Guns are the least of your troubles. They’ll most likely have automata equipped for battle lying in wait.”

“In that case, your worries are unfounded. I have the world’s best automaton with me.”

“That’s why you’re an idiot! Forget D-Works, worry about getting caught by the security here first. If the fact that you bring her out is discovered, you’ll be expelled, and Yaya will be confiscated and dismantled.”

“So all I have to do is not be discovered, right?”

“... You bear the grudge of the Kingsfort family. It’s also possible that behind that grudge lies the ire of the government. There are many people who want to kill you- or rather have been waiting impatiently for the chance to do so.”

“You of all people should understand.”

“—huh?”

“Family is not something that you should lose so easily.”

Because once you lose it, it can never return.

The only thing left is a lifetime of regret that will never vanish.

“Besides, you said it yourself. I’m a person bound by the code of the samurai.”

Even though they had barely knew each other, Yomi sacrificed herself to save Raishin.

That was surely because she trusted him.

She believed in him, and knew that she could leave the rest to him.

And that's why Raishin was going to go.

Even if it meant putting his body in grave danger, he would break the shackles binding Frey.

"... I'm not letting you leave."

Sigmund perched on Charl's arm, and with magic energy beginning to well up, spoke in a voice that sounded like a threat.

"If you say that you're going no matter that, then you'll have to defeat me first."

Sigmund's eyes were glowing, and a bright light was shining from within the gaps of his fangs.

Yaya prepared to leap to his front, but Raishin halted her, and spoke to Charl in a calm voice.

"Why are you so adamant on preventing me from leaving? If something does happen to me, it won't affect you, so why?"



“... The code of the Samurai. You saved me once.”

While saying that, Charl hurriedly turned her head the other way.

“Only once. Just that one time. That’s why to return the favour, I have to protect you as well. It’s only fair that way. Of course I’m only going to protect you once. But since it’s only one time- no matter what happens I’ll protect you. Even if it means doing something that will make you hate me.”

Once again, they glared at each other.

Charl was serious. Sigmund had also picked up on her intentions, and was already preparing to battle.

Their concern was obvious. Yaya cast her eyes downward in sadness. However, Raishin wasn’t about to back down either.

Reaching into his breast with his left hand, he took out a silver pendant.

“This is the charm you gave me. Although the chain has been broken.”

“Was it when Cherubim sliced you...?”

“This thing helped save my life once. That means, you’ve already protected me once.”

“— that’s not what I was talking about!”

“That’s not what I meant either. What I meant to say is, you need to have more faith. Not in me though. Believe in the power of this charm you gave me.”

The pendant was swaying slightly. Staring at its sparkle, the expression on Charl’s face changed.

She frowned with her lips pouted.

“... That’s unfair. Bringing that out now is such a cowardly move.”

This pendant, as much as she disliked it, caused her to remember the time she was saved by Raishin.

That time, Raishin had thrown himself into battle for Charl’s sake, without giving a second thought to his own life.

It was the same now. Once again, Raishin was going to risk his life in order to rescue someone else’s. Charl didn’t have the right to stop him. After all, she had been saved by him too.

“... Fine. Go where you like. Go where you like and die by the roadside. And then after you die, I hope you get eaten by dogs.”

“Heh, that’s a sudden 180 in your attitude.”

Raishin chuckled wryly. Grumpily slipping past him, Charl left him with a stinging barb.

“You are really, really an idiot the size of Big Ben!”

And she was gone. He thought he had seen some colour in her cheeks, but he was no longer able to confirm it.

Yaya and Raishin exchanged glances, then dashed off into the darkness.

An hour later—

Raishin and Yaya were on a horse, sprinting like the wind in the dead of the night, finally stopping at a small wheat field near the orphanage.

Komurasaki’s Yagaesumi was in effect on the both of them. However, the horse was a different matter. The sound of its hooves thundering and the sound of its breathing would be heard from far off.

Because of that, they had to stop the horse a little ways from their actual destination. The stabbing pain in his arm caused Raishin to grimace, but he laughed it off as he dismounted from the horse.

“Oh man. I told myself I would never come here again.”

The orphanage in question was bright even at night. The rooms inside (if they could be called rooms) were all lit up.

“There are a lot of guards on watch.”

“It looks like what happened this afternoon must have been quite a shock to them.”

“Is that referring to Raishin and Komurasaki making out?”

“That is a gross distortion of the facts, ok? I was this close to dying—”

A red light flashed on their heads. Guided by instinct, the two leapt backwards from where they were standing.

A cluster of metal pierced the ground near their feet. They were short swords!

The dust began to swirl. Frightened by the sudden attack, the horse dashed off by itself at full speed.

Although it was something they had taken from the military for their own convenience, they couldn't afford to let it get caught.

Looking up, he could see there were shadows on the roof of the orphanage observing them. It looked like there were about eight to ten of them. If half of them were automata, their strength wasn't something he could afford to take lightly.

Before they could be surrounded, Raishin moved first. Opening his hand towards Yaya, he channeled his magic energy over. Dispelling Komurasaki's Yaegasumi, he activated Yaya's Kongouriki.

"Go wild, Yaya."

"Roger! That's Yaya's specialty!"

"... Good. You don't have to hold back like you normally do, ok?"

Tearing through the air like a flash of lightning, the two of them charged into the orphanage.

Chapter 7 – The Sword Angel Dancing in the Palm of a Hand

Part 1

A little while before Raishin charged into the orphanage—

In a street that was deathly silent, Komurasaki was hopping about from roof to roof.

Komurasaki's senses were superior to wild animals. Even the darkness of night couldn't slow her down. Although she was nowhere near Yaya, her body was still lighter than most humans around that size. With her light body almost floating in the air, she leapt with sure-footed steps, rushing over to the academy.

Using her heightened sense of perception she quickly identified the places where security was lacking. She could have used her hidden form on herself, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Sneaking through a gap between the sentries, she stealthily slipped into the academy grounds.

Sprinting up the main street, the figure of Raishin soon came into sight.

Something had been wrapped around Yaya's arm. Raishin soon noticed her presence.

"Thanks for coming Komurasaki. This request might be a bit sudden, but I need you to lend me your strength."

“... What did Shouko say?”

“This is a secret from Shouko.”

‘Eh, but then...’

She glanced behind the both of them.

Blending in with a dark grove of trees, a silver-haired maiden— Irori was standing there.

Raishin’s face stiffened. However, Irori spoke in a tone that seemed more like she was talking to herself.

“I didn’t see anything.”

“... I owe you, Irori. Well then Komurasaki, please.”

Turning to face Komurasaki, he clapped his hands together, assuming the begging posture.

Honestly speaking, going behind Shouko’s back without getting her opinion was a scary thing to do. However—

“... Well, if Raishin puts it that way...”

The afternoon's incident had affected her. She knew the military was just using Raishin as a decoy so they could move freely, yet she didn't tell him. In the end, Raishin had to watch Yomi die, and it had hurt him.

That feeling of culpability had been weighing heavily on Komurasaki ever since.

Receiving magic energy from Raishin, it was converted into a moderate wavelength, activating the Yaegasumi circuit. The magic art came into effect, enveloping Raishin and Yaya within.

Ordinary people were now no longer able to detect even the slightest hint of their presence.

"Thanks a lot. Let's go, Yaya."

"Ok."

The two of them dashed off. Watching the two of them disappear, a slight feeling of loneliness crept in.

Sharply picking up on her little sister's emotions, Irori approached her.

"What's wrong, Komurasaki?"

"... Hey sis, I was thinking. Wouldn't it be great if I had battle capability as well?"

“Don’t say that. You and I both have our own roles to perform.”

“So what’s mine?”

“Well, because you’re around, our master can freely go where she pleases. It’s a role you’ve been performing splendidly thus far.”

“Then, what’s your role, sis?”

“... Let’s see, well, for the moment. . .”

Ever so slightly, an unusually gentle smile broke out on her face as Irori spoke.

“I’m the one going to ask our master to forgive Raishin for what he’s about to do.”

Holding hands, the two sisters walked off into the darkness.

Part 2

Concealing the sound of her footsteps, Frey quietly entered the ward.

The number of curtains surrounding the bed was four, but the number of fools present was none.

“If you’re looking for that idiot, he’s gone.”

A sudden voice called out to her from behind.

Turning her head around, there was a beautiful girl sitting in the corner. A little dragon was resting upon her head.

“Uu... You’re the T-Rex.”

Turning her head away with a “hmp”, there was a slight blush in her cheeks as Charl spoke.

“Your dog, I mean... how is he doing?”

Frey looked down, gripping the hem of her skirt.

Confronted with the unease she had been suppressing all this time, she couldn’t hold back her emotions as tears began to leak from her eyes.

“If Rabi dies... I... I’ll be left all alone...”

“... Hmph. You’re not alone. You never were.”

Surprised by her unexpected words, Frey looked up. Charl continued on, a little sullenly, “Don’t you think there’s an important someone who’s been thinking about you all this time?”

“...?”

“It seems ‘those who have it’ probably don’t know they do. Never mind that, let’s talk about that idiot.”

“Where... did he go?”

“Who knows? He could be at an orphanage somewhere, trying to steal something.”

Orphanage. Steal.

The meaning behind those words were all too clear to her.

“Why...?!”

“That’s exactly how I felt! But he’s that sort of person. He’s weak against a girl’s tears, and can’t bear to leave them just like that. Such a useless fellow.”

Although she was speaking ill of Raishin, the depths of Charl's eyes had a gentle light in them.

"As it stands, he's already close to dying. Furthermore, his plan on rescuing several automata is totally reckless. If the guards here or the professors were to find out, it would be curtains for him—"

"Unfortunately, I already know."

Charl and Frey were paralysed in shock by the sudden voice.

Kimberly was standing in the doorway of the ward.

Her usual white coat was absent. Instead, she was wrapped in an unfamiliar gorgeous black mantle, which had a gold hem. The design was geometrically mysterious.

"Is it about my get-up? Obviously I'm going out of the academy. As a professor I have a responsibility to supervise my students. So now I'm going to discipline an idiot."

—She was planning on following Raishin!

"Don't make that face. I'm not planning on following him immediately. My current goal is to ensure his safety first."

Charl and Frey simultaneously exchanged looks.

“Oho, I see you’re both extremely interested. If you can keep a few secrets, I’ll bring you guys along. How about it, Charlotte? Aren’t you worried about **Second Last**? Especially since you two have been so close recently.”

“Wh-wh-what makes you think that pervert and I are cl-close!?”

“So you’re not going?”

Hesitating a little, Charl eventually shook her head, saying in a clear voice.

“No. I have faith after all.”

“Aww, isn’t that sweet.”

“N-no! I’m not talking about that idiot; I have faith in the defensive amulet I gave him!”

“Frey, what about you?”

Frey turned to look in the direction of the doctor’s office, which was next to the ward.

Rabi was still unconscious. There was no telling if or when his condition would take a turn for the worse.

Still, even if that was the case.

She had an obligation to see with her own eyes what Raishin was doing.

Stiffly raising her head up, she replied with an “I’m going.”

Part 3

“Kouen Juuniketsu!”

At the same time he issued the command to Yaya, Raishin dashed forward with all his strength.

The enemy greatly outnumbered them. To be surrounded would be disadvantageous. Therefore, he would take the initiative!

He targeted the closest enemy. Yaya leapt onto it, causing it to lose balance. Raishin swept it off its feet, and Yaya dealt the finishing blow. The automaton was instantly turned into little more than scrap metal.

However, the enemy wasn't done in just yet.

Moving to surround Raishin, about half of them circled around to his back.

Unfortunately, their movements were painfully uncoordinated. The short swords that flew at Raishin were linear and easily telegraphed. The time it took to retrieve the swords were also very long. It was a far cry from Loki, who could control them freely.

Synchronising their breathing, Raishin and Yaya attacked the enemies in turn. Smashing the torso of the first, they knocked the head clean off the second, and sent the last crashing into the group of puppeteers. Having seen four units scattered all about the place like that, their opponents' fighting spirit plummeted. They all turned, preparing to flee.

Taking advantage of that moment, Raishin threw a stun grenade into their midst.

A blinding light erupted forth. Raishin had already turned his back on it, running towards the cattle barn with Yaya.

Throwing open the closed door, he rushed inside.

It was cold. And strangely quiet.

He hurriedly lit a lamp. Holding it over his head, he looked around, and knew the reason for the silence.

All the cages were empty!

The worst case scenario flashed into his mind. Could it be that they had already been disposed of...!?

"Raishin! The enemy is headed this way!"

Yaya called to him from the other side of the door. Raishin closed his eyes.

Calm down. There's still hope. Believe that they're still alive.

For the security measures here to be so excessively strict, it must mean that they were being cautious of something.

It would be damaging for them if their secret were to be leaked out to the world. It would be disastrous if the fact that they had been performing illegal experiments were brought to light.

In short, they were afraid of the long arm of the law.

Even if they wanted to get rid of the evidence, the Garm series was a Bandoll type, and thus couldn't be just thrown away so easily—

At that moment, he was struck by an epiphany.

There was a way to stealthily transport a large number of automata and Shiramiko.

And this facility had the ideal “equipment” for doing so!

At that moment, the ceiling broke apart with a loud tearing sound.

Something had torn through the roof. It was something like the sharp end of a sword, but the tip had only appeared for a brief moment. Like a giant can opener, it began to carve out a portion of the ceiling.

“Yaya!”

“I got it!”

Yaya jumped upwards. Kicking, she pulverised the large piece of the falling ceiling.

The fragments scattered about, causing the walls to collapse. Raishin covered his head, waiting for the dust to settle.

After it had done so, he saw something he didn’t want to see.

Mercenaries were standing there. There were about ten of them, clothes and physique were both ragged, standing in a circle around him. Obviously, each had an automaton following them. A golem type, a four-legged wild beast type, even a thin humanoid type, there were various types of automata present.

In front of Raishin, who was on guard, a giant sword stabbed itself into the ground with a thud.

Standing on top, someone was looking down on them.

“If I may say so myself, I am a tolerant person... However, there are three things in this world I cannot forgive. People who give me orders. People who defy me. And finally, reckless vermin who scurry about like rats.”

It was Frey’s younger brother, Loki. The Sword Emperor had made his grand entrance.

By some unknown method, he had managed to bring Cherubim out of the academy grounds. Since floating in the air was Cherubim’s strong point, if it was just Loki alone, he might have been able to climb on it and fly out.

His pearl white hair fluttered as he leapt off the giant sword onto the ground.

Just like Loki had said, Raishin was the proverbial rat in a trap. Not only was he surrounded by ten automata, the Sword Emperor was standing right in front of him.

Just as he thought, this is really not good; Cherubim’s short swords whirled to life.

Piercing the heart directly, the automaton toppled over like a wooden doll.

But Yaya wasn’t hurt. The short swords were targeting the mercenaries’ automata!

In the time Raishin was dumbfounded, the short swords had flown towards another automaton.

“What the hell are you doing!?” “We’re your allies here!”

The mercenaries were thrown into panic. However, Loki wordlessly continued his slaughter.

The truth finally dawning on them, the mercenaries howled with anger and began to attack Loki.

One automaton charged in, one more breathed fire. However, the attacks didn’t reach Loki. The whirling short swords and Cherubim’s blade sliced, diced, and cleaved the rest of the automata.

The circle surrounding Raishin was crumbling.

Raishin quickly rushed forward, bringing Yaya with him to break out of the circle.

Like he was competing with Loki, the two of them broke down the door to the orphanage and rushed in.

Behind them, a rain of bullets descended.

They hurriedly rolled out of the way. Being protected by Yaya and Cherubim, the two of them scrambled for cover behind a pillar.

Raishin breathed a sigh relief. Once he felt assured they were safe, he turned to Loki and yelled at him.

“You! What was with that sudden appearance! Make it clear if you’re an enemy or an ally-“

“Does your idiocy know no bounds?! Why don’t you think before you act?!”

He felt ashamed at Loki’s words. Loki continued on, “Do you know what you’re doing? An academy student assaulting a member of the public- that is a capital offence!”

“Shut up and think about it carefully, you western idiot! They’re performing illegal experiments here, right? There’s no way these people can go to the police!”

“From the bottom of my heart, I praise you as the world’s greatest idiot! Don’t you think that D-Works would have already prepared themselves in case they were brought to justice? Your ‘evidence’ will never be accepted in court! You’ll just be burned at the stake after going through a witch trial by the Church!”

“What!? You’re just an idiot who can’t save people properly! When that time comes—“

Raishin laughed lightly mid-sentence.

“Then I’ll just have to fight against this God person.”

Even Loki was left dumbfounded by his declaration. Recovering, he knitted his brows in displeasure.

“Stop trying to act cool. I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Fine, throw up then. By the way, what about you? You might be preaching to me, but don’t forget you also went wild back there. For your information, you’ve cut down at least eight people already. Hey, Mr. Policeman, there’s a violent criminal on the loose here!”

“Silence you coward! Mr. Prosecutor, the principal defendant is this guy right here!”

The two of them glared at each other. Behind them, the mercenaries from earlier had caught up.

While keeping an eye on them, Raishin spoke.

“Why would an esteemed member of the Rounds be willfully engaging in a criminal act anyway?”

“Who knows? I’m just here because I want to hit people I can’t stand till I feel satisfied.”

“... Are you prepared to be burned at the stake for a reason like that?”

Their eyes met. An instant later, out of nowhere, they both suddenly spat out.

“”What.””

Their voices were simultaneous.

“”I guess we’re both idiots.””

They flew out at the same time. They weren’t planning on attacking each other; instead, standing back to back they attacked in opposite directions.

Yaya blocked the incoming bullets, and Raishin leapt over her back, kicking and striking, knocking the enemies down.

Loki’s short swords gracefully danced as he passed through blood spraying everywhere as he scythed through the opposing puppeteers.

Showing absolutely no signs of co-ordination whatsoever, the only thing they had in common was the amount of force used. The mercenaries behind and the riflemen in front were both pushed back by their onslaught, eventually being routed.



Chasing after the retreating riflemen, they went further inside. Ahead of them was a passageway that connected the main building to a separate one. Bursting through the passage, they emerged into a wide courtyard.

If they could break through here, they would reach the staircase leading to the basement. Just a little more and—

“Raishin! Get back!”

Yaya suddenly braked, causing Raishin to bounce off her back.

The next instant, like a bolt of lightning, a sword came crashing down from directly above.

It was big and shiny. The golden blade was a beautiful sight to behold... and equally sinister looking as well. This form and design was something he had seen before, somewhere.

“This is... Cherubim?”

“No— this is Lucifer.”

Loki answered, as a drop of cold sweat shone on his cheek.

(This guy is sweating...!?)

If even Loki was sweating, then this was surely a formidable foe. Raishin frantically searched for the figure of their opponent.

And then, he found him.

Standing by a window on the third floor, a slender gentleman was calmly looking down at them.

Placing his foot onto the window frame, he launched his body into the air.

Slowly descending as lightly as a feather, he landed in the middle of the courtyard.

Raishin's eyes opened wide. If that was by means of telekinesis, then that was some fearsome magic energy!

"It looks like today's my lucky day."

His finely chiseled face turning to face them, he spoke in a cold voice.

"I'll be able to obtain quality parts from the both of you without too much effort."

Part 4

This exchange was watched by Frey, who was peeking from the rooftop.

The figure of her stepfather almost caused her to cry out loud, but she hurriedly covered her mouth with her hands.

This was one of the promises she had made to Kimberly. The only thing she was allowed to do was to watch. In any case, since Rabi wasn't around, it wasn't like she could have helped them at all.

Boiling with anger, Loki glared at his stepfather Bronson with malice.

In contrast, Bronson was calm and composed. His gaze at Loki was as sharp as steel.

"Are you out of your mind, my son?"

"... I have been, until now. Always suppressing my doubts, and wagging my tail obediently in front of you."

In response to Loki's fury, the twin blades on Cherubim's left and right arms engaged.

"But now, my vision is clouded no more. Fall into hell!"

Releasing magic energy into Cherubim, the automata charged forward.

Based on appearance alone, Cherubim's one defining trait was heaviness. It generated the image of a car which weighed in the region of a hundred kilograms or more. Something whose rampage would be impossible to control.

However, Loki's movements were as though that handicap weren't there at all. The steel blade roared as it sliced through the air, precisely aimed at Bronson's neck. However-

Frey knew the extent of her stepfather's strength, but she still couldn't suppress her shock.

The thing that blocked Cherubim's strike was a small short sword, floating in mid-air.

Such amazing control! That attack didn't even faze him in the slightest!

Loki commanded Cherubim to fall back. However, that was what his opponent had been aiming for.

Blocking its path of retreat was the giant sword, Lucifer, which was still stuck into the ground.

The giant sword transformed in an instant, taking the form of a human.

The golden angel, Lucifer.

Just like Cherubim, both its hands had large blades on them. Right now the blades were aimed for Cherubim's defenseless back. The sound of Cherubim's back being crushed—

No, things were fine. Yaya had caught the blade, blocking the surely fatal strike.

Beside Loki, Raishin laughed sarcastically.

"What's wrong, finding it tough?"

"... Silence, fool. I made it such that it would be easy for you to enter the fray. Be grateful for my consideration."

They exchanged looks of complicity. The next moment, they both focused their magic energy.

The first to attack was Yaya. Kicking Lucifer's blades up, she leapt into the air.

This was a technique Raishin had mastered. Moving like a practitioner of martial arts, she somersaulted once in mid-air. Completing the flip, she bore down with her full weight.

The bottom of her boots struck Lucifer square on the head... Or it should have.

Smoothly and unnaturally, Yaya's kick slipped off its surface.

Lucifer's counterattack was blazingly fast. Its blades caught Yaya in mid-air, blowing her back about ten meters.

Frey was dumbfounded. How did Yaya, whose kicks could break rocks, miss with her attack?

(A magic art...?)

Just like Cherubim, the magic circuit installed inside Lucifer was the Jet circuit. Thinking of what the circuit was capable of, the moment when it should have eaten the kick—

(Was it deflected... with a blast of highly dense hot air?)

Unbelievable. It was a feat of careful calculation of speed and trajectory, akin to shooting a bullet with another bullet.

“Cherubim— Whirl!”

At Loki's command, Cherubim changed into its sword form.

In that instant, Frey's sixth sense perceived the invisible Nozzle. Gathering air heated up to scorching levels, then spitting it out, she could recognize the effects like it was visible.

Blasting air, it moved with the force of the kickback. With a large amount of thrust, the giant sword flew.

There wasn't just one Nozzle. Using the thrust generated by several of them in conjunction with each other, it was possible to perform complicated maneuvers. Drawing a large arc in the air, the giant sword slashed at Lucifer.

Instead of blocking, Lucifer retreated. As it did so, four short swords shot out.

Bypassing Cherubim, they headed straight for Loki.

Frey covered her mouth. She had narrowly avoided screaming out loud.

Slashing his shoulder and gouging his abdomen, the four short swords pierced Loki. The force of the swords knocked Loki down onto the ground, leaving him motionless.

Looking at Loki, who was gasping in anguish, Bronson spoke with a disappointed tone in his voice.

"How foolish. In a real battle, going after the controller is standard practice."

“That sounds pretty good to me.”

From behind Bronson, Raishin’s voice could be heard.

Bronson’s back was at his mercy! If Bronson moved, he would attack him accordingly. He was at the perfect distance for close combat. Lucifer was being occupied by Yaya. Perhaps, this was it...?

—No, that wasn’t it! It was a trap!

There were eight short swords in total. Four had pierced Loki. So then, where were the remaining four?

Yaya wanted to scream he was in danger, but the warning died in her throat.

She wouldn’t have made it anyway. The short swords emerged from the ground, slicing Raishin.

Raishin clumsily tumbled about. The attack sliced open his wounds, and cut across his chest.

His bleeding was severe. Looking at him, one wouldn’t think he’d be able to stand up again anymore.

“Raishin! Are you ok? Raishin!”

Yaya was all flustered. Instead of using this opening to retreat, Lucifer charged towards Yaya instead.

It looked like it was going to continue the attack on Raishin. Preventing it from doing so, Loki issued a command to Cherubim to intercept. And then, he himself moved to attack Bronson.

However, all his efforts were in vain.

Lucifer easily sidestepped Cherubim, sending it flying with a blow.

Bronson brushed off Loki's fist, then thrust his palm upwards against Loki's jaw.

"I have a right to be angry. The dog that I raised is biting the hand that fed it."

Gripping Loki, he pulled him to his feet, and threw him against the wall.

The back of Loki's head crashed directly into the bricks. Frey unconsciously closed her eyes, tears leaking from the sound of the moment of impact.

(Loki...! Raishin...!)

All she could do was pray for their safety. She was truly pathetic. If only she had strength... if only she had ability like Loki's.

Ah, even though I'm Loki's older sister. Even though we're siblings bound by blood. Why is it that I'm always so useless?

Bronson stared at Loki with a mixture of contempt and unwillingness to give up on him.

"I don't understand. Why would you turn against me? Haven't I rewarded you well all this while?"

"... I... We... used to just say yes to you."

His limbs dangling languidly, Loki spoke in a voice that sounded more like he was groaning.

"Even though one day, all our friends vanished... even though you made us go through those experiments that felt like death itself..."

"You're making less and less sense. Why then, would you betray me now?"

"... If I may... say so myself... I am a tolerant person. However, there are three things in this world I cannot forgive. People who give me orders. People who defy me. And finally,"

His lips trembling, he smiled slightly.

"Scum who betray their elder sister."

In that instant, something struck Frey like a bolt of lightning.

The words Charl had spoken to her finally made sense.

Her forehead was hot, to the point it felt like it was burning up. Her tears flowed on endlessly.

She always thought he had hated her. For so long, she had thought he shunned her.

Looked down on her since she was a useless sister. A weak, pathetic elder sibling.

Held a grudge for causing their parents' death.

However, the truth about Loki was vastly different.

Far from hating her—

“... Such a pity. You were the most successful individual.”

Bronson sighed, shaking his head.

“A lot of time was invested into raising the both of you siblings to become prime fields. We even specifically brought you all the way out to the new continent, just to perform those trifling modifications, all to ensure success. “

Huh, thought Frey.

Forgetting to blink away her tears, she stared down at her stepfather, who was directly below her.

Modification. That word stuck in her head. Modification. Modification. No way. It couldn't be-

They couldn't have.

“U... Uuuuuwoooooooooooooooooah!”

Loki roared. Cherubim jumped to life, heading straight at Bronson.

However, the end result was the same as previously. Cherubim was brushed aside by Lucifer.

Bronson grabbed Loki and casually threw him across the room, just like he was throwing away a piece of garbage.

“Settle down. Don’t worry, I won’t kill you here. The ‘parts’ you possess are extremely valuable. It would be such a waste if I don’t dismantle you while you’re still alive.”

Frey crouched where she was, cowering. She cursed herself. Why is this body so weak!? My brother is in pain, and all I can do is watch him suffer!

Ah, someone... anyone... please, God!

Save Loki. Please, somehow, just save—

Her prayer may or may not have reached, but something happened then.

Unexpectedly, Bronson let out a voice full of interest.

“... You can still move? Such a surprising Oriental... Perhaps you are a unique individual?”

In front of him, unsteadily rising to his feet was a bloody Raishin.

He was standing right behind Loki.

Frey’s eyes started to water.

Why, she thought. Why was he doing this?

Was he doing all this just for our sake?

Even though I already wounded him before!

By the time she noticed it, Loki was also on his feet already. It was like he couldn't bear to be the only one out cold. Cherubim too, in response to its master's will, was moving once again.

While staring at Bronson, Raishin muttered to Loki.

"... Can you still fight?"

"Hmph... Who do you think you're talking to?"

"Good. Then here's the plan."

And then, Raishin told him. Frey couldn't hear it, but Loki nodded slightly.

"... Fine. I'll bet on you this time."

"Don't worry, I won't let you down. But if this bet pays off, you're treating me to a meal."

“I’ll pass. Eating with you would make the food unpleasant.”

Bronson shrugged his shoulders, looking like he was getting tired of them.

“This is rather troublesome. So, what clever scheme have you come up with?”

“This clever scheme will be the end of you. But first, I want you to answer me.

Why did you trick Frey?”

Raishin asked in a sharp voice. Rather than asking, it would be more correct to say Raishin pressed him for an answer.

“You had no intention of ever keeping the Garm types alive, so why did you force Frey to fight? Why did you modify Frey’s heart? Why did you make her— cry?”

Bronson stared at Raishin, bored, then replied

“Because it’s irreversible.”

“... What’s irreversible?”

“Progress in science is little more than an accumulation of repeated advancements. It isn’t something that can be reversed. Both regression and stagnation are unforgivable as well. For humanity, stagnation would effectively mean we have come to a halt as a species; it would mean our destruction. Investigating mysteries, searching for the truth, making progress in science; these are the road which humanity must advance onward. Mages have to contribute to that progress. That is the reason why the academy exists. The Wiseman’s seat too, exists for that reason.”

A faint smile formed on his face as he paused.

“And for that reason, the end will always justify the means.”

The words hit Frey like a bullet to the heart.

Progress? Advancement? For such a reason— for this reason alone?

Father and mother.

Loki and myself both.

Just when Frey felt her heart was rend into two-

Raishin’s magic energy began to swell up with a thunderous roar.

An extraordinary power, which she had never felt before till now, flowed through and gush forth from Raishin.

“If humanity’s “progress” means stealing children away from their families—“

Raishin’s eyes glowed with a red light. It was the same as the Promised Children— no, it was much stronger!

“I will destroy humanity!”

Yaya kicked the ground.

Her speed was terrifying. In a single bound she had closed the distance between her and Lucifer, and was now next to it.

A quick kick. And another. And another. Lucifer dodged and blocked all. However, that was all according to the plan. Cherubim had already transformed, and now a large sword was flying in its direction.

It was very heated up in there, but Raishin didn’t commit Yaya too deeply into the fight; instead he focused on getting her to evade away. Having lost sight of its target, Lucifer was open to Cherubim, who slammed into the former.

Bronson seemed to have foresaw this combination. Lucifer had its blades crossed, blocking the strike of the large sword.

Without a moment's delay he had Lucifer transform, and performed a counterattack.

Converting hot air into thrust, it floated about in mid-air. The two large swords began to attack each other.

The magic art was activated next. Each time the swords clashed, Lucifer would release a blast of extremely hot air, scorching the surface of Cherubim.

Each blast of hot air exceeded several thousand degrees, as well as exerted several thousand pounds of pressure. This was enough to cut cleanly through any sort of steel. Such was the true power of the Jet circuit.

However, Lucifer's blade only glanced into the other blade. Cherubim wasn't severed at all.

In fact the both of them would eat into each other by a few centimeters... and stop there.

On the spur of the moment, Frey racked her brains, trying to dig up information about the Jet circuit.

For it to cut through steel, the heat had to be focused onto one point. The hot air that Lucifer generated had been scattered by the hot air generated from Cherubim... and since the heat couldn't be focused, the heat generated wasn't enough to reach the melting point of steel.

Both swords having been heated up though, when they collided, they became welded together. At that precise moment, there was an opening.

Yaya appeared directly below Lucifer.

Caught in mid-air, Lucifer had no defiance left. — was this it?

“Such a pity. You were almost there.”

Unperturbed, Bronson had Lucifer change back.

Now in its humanoid form, only one blade was currently wielded. The other one was free!

The other blade which Lucifer was brandishing had an intense magic energy in it. He was planning to use the Jet circuit's power to cut apart Yaya.

Yaya raised her left arm, covering her head. Like such an absurd gesture would help!

The blade ate into Yaya's left arm, on the brink of severing it cleanly—

With a boom, Yaya's left arm exploded.

The blade stopped at Yaya's arm. The arm itself wasn't severed.

(Did Raishin... notice it?)

Frey was right. Raishin had seen through the trick behind the Jet circuit, and had prepared for it meticulously.

The Jet circuit focused exceedingly high temperature to a point so that it could cut through all things like a hot knife through butter. To guard against such an attack, a blast from an equally hot source would cause the heat gathered to dissipate. Earlier on, Loki had done something like that.

Raishin had understood this, and thus had hidden explosives up Yaya's sleeves.

And he had waited for this moment before unleashing his trump card.

Such nerve! Was this the strength of the puppeteer who defeated Cannibal Candy!?

“Suimei Zesshou—”

Raishin's right arm, which shouldn't have been able to move, was now extended towards Yaya.

Receiving an absurdly large amount of magic energy, a terrifying amount of power began to build up in Yaya's legs.

For a split second, Lucifer was at a loss for what to do.

It wanted to drop the blade and escape. Unfortunately for it however, the explosion had caused its finger joints to break down. But attributing it to just fortune would be a mistake. A combination of Raishin's planning, and a certain someone's thoughts had combined to curse Lucifer.

In Frey's eyes, she could see the shadow of an old dog biting onto the neck of Lucifer.

"Hisagi Tachikage"

Glowing, Yaya released the energy stored in her legs.

A torrent of light burst forth.

Yaya's figure suddenly disappeared, her visage chipping away at Lucifer's body.

Would seeing Yaya at her superhuman speed cause her stepfather to realize it?

The speed she was at operating at now demonstrated spatial perception power at a level which surpassed humans. The power which could stifle the Jet circuit was obviously in his hands, but it wasn't something he himself could control.

And that was exactly why he had to create a situation in which he would never miss.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Yaya landed.

Like a shooting star, she landed with a loud impact. The resulting tremor seemed to have affected their wounds, for Loki and Raishin staggered, pitching forward then falling down.

Both of them had lost a lot of blood. Putting it bluntly, they were heavily injured. Even in that condition, the both of them were unwilling to show their weakness to each other. Like everything was fine, they started a conversation with each other in a normal voice.

“So, **Second Last**, you’re still alive. You’re about to faint, aren’t you?”

“That’s my line. Your exhausted figure is so unsightly. I bet you can’t even stand anymore, can you?”

“Idiot. I’m just taking a short break here. You on the other hand, look like you’re on the verge of death.”

“Idiot, I’m just looking at the stars. I bet you didn’t know I have an interest in astrology.”

“I didn’t know you can see stars lying face down. You must really be about to die, since you’re seeing stars in your delirium.”

“Who’s about to die? Like your condition is any better. Once we get back you need to get to the hospital pronto. You’ll have to stay in the ward for a long time. Maybe you can get an angel in white to pamper you while you’re there.”

“You need one. One that will feed you by hand, and gently wipe your body.”

“Moron, if a nurse did something like that... it wouldn’t end well. She’ll be murdered by Yaya, you moron.”

“Raishin! Please, stop talking already!”

Yaya was disturbed by their behaviour. Hugging onto Raishin, she cried out.

Loki and Raishin were both saying things that didn’t make sense at all. Their heads weren’t moving any longer. Unable to sit still any longer, Frey dashed off towards the stairs.

She could hear an agitated Yaya.

Loki’s consciousness appeared to be fading. Raishin’s abusive voice was no longer present. Probably, he had ended up like Loki. The only thing left ringing in the hallway was Yaya’s wailing-

(Both of you, please don’t die...!)

The smiling faces of her deceased parents flashed before her eyes, causing a deep, cutting pain in her chest.

Drops of tears scattering as she ran, Frey single-mindedly continued to sprint on.

Part 5

“... A rather pathetic ending.”

Staring at the crying automaton, Bronson muttered under his breath.

Pulling out a pistol from his breast, he took aim at them.

In the automaton girl's panic, she hadn't noticed him. With her master in that condition, she wouldn't be able to activate her steel wall-like defense, and even a bullet now would be able to do her in.

Once he stopped her, it would be his victory. Losing Lucifer was an unfortunate turn of events, but on the flipside Cherubim was still intact. D-works would still be able to take part in the competition.

Feeling that the whole situation was tedious, he pulled the trigger.

As he did so, a dagger embedded itself into his arm, throwing off his aim.

The sound of the gunshot rang out. However, the bullet missed its target.

The pain caused his hand to twitch, dropping the gun onto the floor.

He suddenly became aware of several presences that weren't there before.

Surprised, he looked around him, only to see several figures appearing one after another.

The black shadows stood neatly in a row. Next to windows, up on the roof, there were present everywhere.

All of them had black coats on. The coats were elegant, with gold embroidery on them. The hoods had been pulled low, so that their faces weren't visible. They looked like they were from some religious organization.

When did they arrive? Also, when did they surround this place?

"I apologize for the rather pathetic ending, Mister Bronson."

While saying that, one of the black coats stepped forward.

She removed her hood. The face of a flesh-and-blood woman came into view.

The automaton girl was shocked, half rising to her feet.

"Professor Kimberly!"

Now that she mentioned it, he realized the woman did have the same face as the professor Kimberly from the academy.

“... That is some imitation you pulled off there. Who are you people?”

“We are the Crusaders. Nectar’s watchdogs— you understand now, don’t you?”

Even the ever calm Bronson couldn’t keep his cool hearing something like that. His eyes widened, and his mouth half-opened.

His eyes darted all over the place, looking for an escape route. Then he laughed grimly.

If these people were the real Nectar— there was no path or place to escape to.

“The association... would go out of their way just to sniff around the students at the academy?”

“Don’t say it like that, it’s just that this year’s Night Party has been thrown into disorder and— wait, this isn’t something I should be telling you.”

With a wry smile, the woman looked around her with strong emotions in her eyes.

“Oh boy. Some teacher visitation this has become.”

Meeting the gaze of the automaton girl, she could see a flash of nervousness running through her eyes. With a “Don’t worry” and a wave of the hand to keep her in check, she turned back to face Bronson again.

“The D in D-works stands for divine— such conceit, to think that you were doing the work of the gods themselves. You’ve been charged with performing taboo research, so we’re bringing you in.”

“... Taboo, you say?”

“It would be wiser for you to remain silent rather than play dumb. You look the sort who has a high endurance, and I have something special for people like you. How about we play a game where I pluck your fingernails out and hammer actual nails in?”

Her lips twisted into a sadistic grin as she spoke cheerfully.

“Well, in any case, the evidence is all here anyway. Modification of a human body, disassembly of human bodies into parts, illegal disposal of human bodies, and human experimentation. Oh, and you’re also under arrest for kidnapping and murder.”

Her eyes briefly hovered over the remains of Lucifer, “... Hmph, this thing looks a significantly higher class than the one that follows Loki around. I guess even with this, you couldn’t stop her, huh?”

A sadistic grin etched itself onto her face.

“The passing of time sure can be cruel. The handsome youth once heralded as an angel becomes a middle-aged man, and one who used to control swords telekinetically now has to rely on machines. Having some lingering attachment to the Wiseman name, you actually called your creation Lucifer- thus revealing your true goal, you who were once called the Sword Angel.”

“... It isn't lingering attachment. It's an admonishment, a reminder to myself of the small regret I have.”

“Oh?”

Bronson lost his air of resistance, vacantly looking up into the night sky.

“Right now, I'm just a little disappointed. I'm disappointed at my weakness back then. If I could have obtained the seat of the Wiseman, then this level of taboo research wouldn't be enough to be called a sin.”

“I'm surprised. You really are an idiot.”

“... What do you mean?”

“You're right; the Wiseman is not bounded by the code of ethics all mages follow. However, the Wiseman is still under the jurisdiction of the law.”

The contempt in her voice was blatant as she talked to him like she was rebuking him.

“In human experimentation, the consent of the subject is necessary. You performed a crime of opportunity on young children who couldn’t understand— or obtained and gathered them through illegal means, and forced them to co-operate. Even if you were the Wiseman that would still constitute a cardinal sin. You obsessed over the illusion of progress, but in the end you are merely a fool who was dancing in circles in the palm of a god. Rather than the seat of the Wiseman, the gallows is a better fit for you.”

Bronson closed his eyes, and let out a deep sigh, like his lungs had been vacuumed out.

Finally, everything was over.

The puppeteers in the black coats soundlessly drew closer. Apprehending Bronson, they led him out of the hallway.

With Bronson gone, she turned back towards the fallen youths.

They already had begun to receive emergency treatment, but it was clear both were still on the verge of death. The automaton girl was still sobbing, doing her best to be as loud as possible.

“Really, you guys are such troublesome students.”

In contrast to her tone, the slight giggle and grin betrayed her true feelings.

Finally reaching the hallway, an out of breath Frey ran towards the two youths.

Epilogue – The Killer Demon in White

“Now then, Raishin. Take off your clothes <3”

The light of the setting sun illuminated the hospital room as Yaya spoke with a happy voice.

Dressed in a nurse’s uniform, Yaya had come to nurse Raishin, and was approaching him with a steaming towel in one hand.

“If you don’t obediently remove your pants, I might end up giving you an injection in your eye, you know?”

“No angel dressed in white would ever say something like that, ok? Are you trying to be a devil here?”

Getting exasperated with the fool who was resisting with all his might, nurse Yaya decided to use force.

Grabbing onto Raishin’s waist, she tried to remove his lower garments.

Raishin swung his leg down, which had been set in a cast, bringing a halt to Yaya’s reckless action.



Rubbing her head, which had been kicked, a teary-eyed Yaya said, "Look, this will be over before you can even count the number of spots on the ceiling!"

"Why are you speaking like a ruffian!? Plus, there's someone lying next to me!"

"Yaya could ask for nothing better!"

"But I'm not fine with it! And you're the only one here that's being so shameless!"

At that moment, the curtain portioning off his bed opened with a flap, revealing a cold, murderous intent.

Lying on the bed next to his was Loki, whose expression was like a man about to draw his sword.

"If I may say so myself, I am a tolerant person... However, there are three things in this world I cannot forgive. People who give me orders. People who defy me. And finally, people who do naughty things with a nurse in the ward."

"She's not a nurse, and we weren't about to do anything! If you find it unforgivable then hurry up and help me!"

"Don't be ridiculous. That's your automaton."

“Yes! Yaya is Raishin’s personal doll! Please love Yaya like you always do!”

“Don’t believe her Loki! Nothing could be further from the truth!”

The situation was turning into a big scene. The giant sword leaning on the wall—Cherubim in its sword form, looked annoyed, and turned its face away.

“So early in the day and you lot are already making such a scene. If you guys are so energetic, how about I throw you back into the Night Party?”

A voice called out from the door way. Seeing the person who spoke, both Raishin and Loki froze, their voices coming to a sudden halt.

“What with those faces? Especially since your great benefactor has decided to grace you with her presence.”

Kimberly grinned mischievously,

“Right, **Second Last**? After all, the association overlooked your illegal excursion, so you ended up getting away scot-free after this incident. I wonder, who do you have to thank for that?”

“... I owe everything to Professor Kimberly.”

“Now then, **Sacred Blaze**. Normally, the automata belonging to the both of you siblings should have been confiscated as illegal evidence. So why are you still able to use them in the Night Party?”

“... I owe everything to Professor Kimberly.”

Raishin grabbed Loki’s neck, pulling him closer so that he could angrily whisper into his ear.

“Now look what you’ve done! Thanks to you making that racket, we now have this unnecessary debt loaded onto us.”

“You idiot. If we look at the root cause of this, the racket only began once you woke up.”

Veins started to pop out on the both their foreheads. They looked to be on the verge of scrapping with each other.

“Well, let’s save that chat for another day. There’s another reason why I’m here.”

“Reason?”

“The both of you aren’t allowed visitors normally, but a professor has special rights. So I’m here because I’m escorting someone to see you.”

With that frank admission she turned and walked out of the ward. The person who entered after she left was a weak-looking girl, who had five dogs in tow with her. Yaya unabashedly went into a vigilant mode.

It was Loki's sister, Frey. She had brought along a Collie, a German Shepherd, a Great Dane, a Dachshund, and a wolf-like dog. All of them had been groomed, their fur sparkling clean.

With the dogs circling around her, Frey stared at Raishin intently.

Her red pupils had a gentle moistness in them, causing them to get a little blurry.

"Uu... Thank you, Raishin."

"... Don't thank me. I'm the one responsible for Yomi's death, and I—"

"Still, thank you."

She smiled warmly.

This was the first time he was seeing Frey smile. Her face was like a magnolia flower, charming and peaceful.

The dogs were also happily wagging their tails. Seeing that, Raishin couldn't bring himself to say anything more than that.

"... I heard about it, by the way. You've upgraded to **Surround Roar**, attacking as a unit."

Out of the twelve they had rescued, four had been added to Frey's control, increasing her battle strength.

Formed into a pack, the Garm types were much stronger than originally imagined. Since they were Bandolls they possessed a high level of autonomy, as a design planned for mass production the requirement to handle them was low. Even if she were controlling five at a time, the burden placed on Frey's body was very little.

Through the dogs "hunting" as a pack Frey had been able to rack up several victories; while Raishin and Loki were incapacitated, she had already won five matches. She had just defeated the 93rd seat the previous night.

"They seem to have multiplied. What are their names?"

"Rabi, Riviera, Ruby, Revina, Robin."

"... Sorry. I can't really remember so many names, so can I just call them RaRiRuReRo?"

Frey had a troubled expression on her face, then went “Uu... more importantly” to change the subject.

She thrust out the basket she was carrying.

“Here, I made lunch. They’re sandwiches.”

Raishin was hit by déjà vu at this sight. However, the Frey now was friendly. It probably wasn’t a trap.

“Oh, then I accept this and I will gratefully ea—”

As he reached out for it, Yaya suddenly snatched it away.

Her pupils were like black holes, and she spoke in a monotone.

“Allow Yaya to taste this for poison first. Thereafter, Yaya will feed Raishin mouth-to-mouth.”

“I refuse. However, I guess you can taste-test it for me first.”

“How cruel, Raishin...! You’re only using Yaya when it’s convenient for you...!”

While wailing things along the same theme, Yaya stuffed her cheeks with the sandwich.

Almost immediately, Yaya's face turned a different colour, and she started coughing.

"Are you ok!? Hey, what did you put inside!?"

"Uu... a love potion— But I couldn't get any, so I added in a lot of rum."

"... Alcohol?"

"If you got really drunk, then the influence of the alcohol might cause you to have an error in judgement, which would cause a misunderstanding to happen..."

"The only thing that's erroneous here is what's going on inside your head, ok? Besides, anyone would spit it out straightaway, you know?"

Frey hung her head somewhat disappointedly. I don't think she meant any harm by it... wait, before that, what was with that love potion she mentioned earlier? Was she planning on making me her slave, so that she would proceed through the Night Party with an advantage?

While Raishin's brain was going into overdrive sorting out his thoughts, Frey had trotted over to Loki, who was sulking for some reason.

"Loki, thank you. You helped protect the dogs."

"... I didn't do anything. You should be thanking that idiot over there."

He wasn't honest. While patting Yaya on the back, Raishin interjected from the side.

"Frey, you know, when you were almost about to get killed, this guy there got so livid—"

The sharp clanging of metal suddenly interrupted him. Cherubim had changed forms, and was now thrusting a blade at Raishin's throat.

"Do you want to die?"

"Perfect. I was just thinking about paying you back for the other day."

Both Yaya and Cherubim were charged with magic energy, assuming battle stances. The powder-keg of a situation just needed another spark for it to blow up. Frey hurriedly thrust herself between the two of them.

“Loki, don’t fight. Because, Raishin might become family one day!”

Silence suddenly returned to the room.

“Uu... Eh... Uu...?”

Looking left and right- she finally realised that they were both at a loss for words, and with a poof, steam started erupting from Frey’s ears. Her eyes spinning, she panicked.

For some reason she raised her hands over her head, then while frantically gesturing like she was summoning a demon, flew out of the ward.

“... Er, what did she just say?”

In front of a blank Raishin, something inside Yaya broke. With drops of tears beginning to form, “As I thought, the two of you... have that. Kind. Of. Relationship...!”

The room rumbled as a mysterious earthquake suddenly hit them, bits of dust falling from the ceiling. Raishin shuddered. He didn’t really understand what was going on, but what he did know was that a killer demon in white was born!

Spurring his aching body into action, he jumped out of the window at full speed.

He frantically ran. Where and how he escaped, he didn't know. In his desperation he had blindly ran without bothering to check his route.

When he came to his senses, he realised he was curled into a ball on top of the roof. Holding his breath, he snuck a peek below, where Yaya, who had seemingly transformed into a rampaging demon, was aimlessly searching for Raishin. He hurriedly withdrew his head back.

He felt bad doing this to Yaya, but as expected, his life was precious to him as well.

Now that he thought about it, he owed a lot to Yaya this time around as well.

For this incident, he had completely gone against his orders. However, Shouko hadn't said a word to him. The ones who interceded on his behalf were the three sisters of the Setsugetsuka.

Just remembering how Shouko was then was enough to give him the shivers now. Shouko had just wordlessly stared at him. For five minutes straight. The silence was far more painful than had she reprimanded him. The message in her eyes was clear. "There will not be a second time." They were warning him.

At that moment, the door behind him opened, causing Raishin's heart to skip a beat.

"... Oh, it's just you. Are you sure it's ok for you to skip out on Loki like that?"

Along with her five dogs, Frey stood there, still with shock.

Noticing Raishin, she turned red again, then moved to escape from him.

... However, she stopped. Turning to face Raishin, she bowed deeply.

“I’m sorry.”

“Huh? If it’s about Yaya, then don’t worry, stuff like this happens all the time.”

“Uu... No, it’s for Loki. Loki’s the one who... shot that bullet.”

Was she was talking about the one that Yaya had gotten hit by?

Raishin closed his eyes, picturing Loki, who was still in the ward.

His arm was in a sling, he had to use crutches, and he was bandaged all over. On top of that, he had bruises and swellings in various places. The handsome features he had been born with was now all messed up.

Raishin laughed lightly, then spoke indifferently.

“If it’s about that, then I’ll definitely pay him back. At the Night Party.”

“... Are you sure? If you report him to the executive committee... Loki will be disqualified, you know?”

In retrospect, Loki’s actions had been consistent.

The Night Party was a zero-sum game where your life itself was the bet— the possibility of dying was there. To prevent her from taking on such a risk, he had tried to distance Frey as far away from the Night Party as possible. For someone as dangerous as Raishin, he decided to take matters into his own hands and remove him personally.

The feelings and thoughts he had for his elder sister was surely the same as the one Raishin had for his own sister as well.

“I lost to him once. Until I repay the favor, I can’t have him disappearing on me.”

Frey’s eyes widened, and then she looked away, embarrassed.

Wanting to escape Raishin’s line of sight, she trotted over to the edge of the rooftop.

Resting her hands on the railing, she stared at the slowly sinking sun.

Raishin stood up and walked over to her side. Frey's face was a bright crimson, but that was probably due to the glow of the setting sun. Gazing at the evening sun, which looked like it was on fire, he softly asked her a simple question.

"Are you planning to continue in the Night Party?"

"Uu... The taboo arts are necessary, so I have to."

"Taboo?"

"For both Loki and my heart... to return them back to normal."

A mechanized heart, which could either stop suddenly, or had the potential to run wild. Having something like that in a person all the time was undesirable, to say the least.

However, if it could be removed from within, a replacement heart could then be inserted into the body. However, the creation of internal organs was considered taboo research.

"Are you sure you want to do it? Knowing Loki, that guy's probably thinking the same thing as you are, you know?"

"... Because I couldn't do anything for him as an older sister before."

While saying that, the look on Frey's face changed, as if her weakness had been a lie, to a sharp one.

"I will take part now. And I won't lose to you either, Raishin."

"Heh, excellent. We'll settle this in the Night Party then."

Because he couldn't move his right arm, he extended his left instead.

Her grip was oddly forceful. And she had used both hands. Looking at the odd expression on Frey's face, like she was desperately clinging on for dear life, Raishin couldn't help but laugh.

The first star appeared in the evening sky.

Tonight, the Night Party would start once again—

At that moment, a voice could be heard from behind them, while their hands were still locked together.

"Rai. Shin. ...!".

An ominous rumbling could be heard.

"Crap."



Afterword

Good afternoon, Kaitou Reiji here.

Thank you for reading the centerpiece (it's a lie) of this month's releases by MF Bunko J.

This might be a bit sudden, but please take a reaaaally close look at the cover girl.

The truth is this time, I issued out the order to the Flat Master Ruroo-san for the “boing boing”. Woooah. So, to all the fans of Ruroo-san, you may now worship the foolhardy control of both me and Shouji-san- Ahh, don't stone us.

Speaking of foolhardiness, this time around I wanted to do a robot which could transform no matter what.

In order to persuade those around me, I decided to construct a 3D model. Starting from the state of “A polygon? What's that, something delicious?” three days later I had managed to make a crude animation. Maybe they'll be moved by my tenacity- I pathetically thought- Shouji-san was half-hearted about giving me the sign to go ahead. In the end though, Ruroo-san submitted a cool design. Cherubim is very cool you know.

Of course, other than Cherubim, Ruroo-san has helped me a lot.

For the table of contents he made the SD character cuter, on the frontispiece cuter, in the character introduction he made Raishin cuter, Loki cuter- wait, he's just making everything cuter isn't he!

Giving Frey a muffler was Ruroo-san's idea. After pitching the idea that the cover art should have chains involved, I knew I'd have to work it somehow into the first scene of the book.

Moving on, let's talk about this book.

At first, the story was all over the place, with several disjointed parts. Seeing as I was in trouble, Ruroo-san pointed out the mistakes, giving a proper backbone to the story.

Wait... We're talking about the theme of the book right?! How did we come to me relying on the illustrator again!?

Thank you Ruroo-san! I'll put in more effort so don't abandon meee!

Time for a special notice. Unbreakable Machine Doll has started monthly serialisation in Comic Alive!

Takagi Hakaru-san is the artist. The style may be different from Ruroo-san, but both Yaya and Sigmund have been skilfully drawn so that they're still very cute~ Getting my work turned into a comic has been a dream of mine ever since I was an amateur, but if I let myself enjoy this too much I'm gonna be in trouble...!

Considering that only two books have been released thus far, the speed at which things are progressing is really strange. This is probably thanks to Shouji-san risking his life to extend his love attack in all directions, hm.

I have really no idea when Shouji-san actually rests... or should I say, he doesn't rest at all. When Kaitou Reiji is hunting dinosaurs, or playing with transformable robots, Shouji-san is actively working hard at his job. Shouji-san! Thank you so much! But please rest! If not I'll feel very guilty!

Also, just yesterday, the single MACHINE DOLL, sung by Harada Hitomi-san, started going on sale.

Strong yet ephemeral, her mellow vocals has enchanted this author. As always, it's constantly on my playlist so I keep hearing the song. Harada-san is an angel!

The wonderfully sweet lyrics were written by the songwriter Linden-san, and they are, they are amazing... they have a deep meaning to them (It's like the promise of progress from hereon after).

Those of you who are interested should definitely check it out. You can also listen to it on the official site.

Even though I stumbled through Machine Doll initially, right now this enormous energy seems to be swelling up inside me. However, if it weren't for you all who read the books, then all the energy inside would have been blown away as quickly as it formed.

That's why I will do my best as well. This energy within me doesn't feel like it's about to stop, so I will continue to write with all my strength, so please continue to treat me favourably!

Well then, let's meet again in Unbreakable Machine Doll 3!

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